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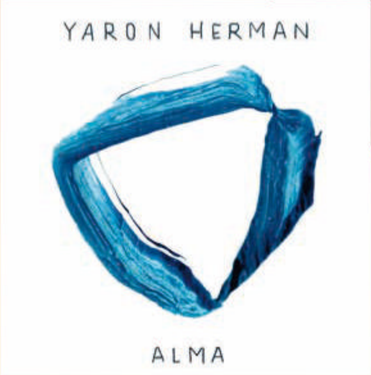

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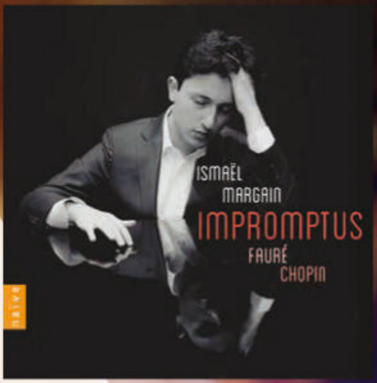

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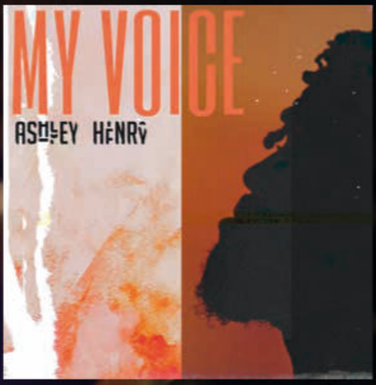

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Rejoicing in talent young and old

Not for the first time, I find myself reflecting on the importance of good teachers – piano teachers, specifically. The late Sulamita Aronovsky was clearly a force of nature – conversations with friends and colleagues leave no doubt about her lasting importance – and Michael Church, who knew her personally, writes a touching appreciation (see page 24). Speaking with William Bracken, this month's One to Watch (page 10), reinforces the crucial role played by established pianists in developing young talent. The leading conservatories all have visiting professors who are known primarily as performers – that's why they're there – and we shouldn't underestimate what they give back in terms of musical education. The next generation, and by extension all of us listeners, benefit hugely from such shared expertise.

In April, Yuja Wang gave the French premiere of Magnus Lindberg's Piano Concerto No 3, an imposingly virtuoso work written for her, at the Paris Philharmonie. The same forces, the Orchestre de Paris and Klaus Mäkelä, went straight on to Aix-en-Provence to repeat the programme (see our review on page 62). From there, as part of a European tour, Yuja Wang was scheduled to play the concerto at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg in early May, with Esa-Pekka Salonen (who had conducted the world premiere in San Francisco back in October), but she became ill. There is a great tradition of pianists standing in to replace stricken soloists, in some cases establishing careers on the back of unplanned triumphs – in fact Yuja Wang accelerated her own career in this way. But what do you do when the work concerned is known only by the pianist for whom it was written? Step in Tamara Stefanovich, who had never before seen the music but learnt the 32-minute concerto in a few days and replaced Yuja Wang in Hamburg – an extraordinary feat of musicianship, bravery and sheer hard work.

Sadly, this month we have lost two piano legends, both born in the 1920s. Menahem Pressler was for most of his career known as the pianist of the Beaux Arts Trio, a wonderful man loved by many, who died just seven months short of his 100th birthday. We pay tribute to this great musician on page 12. Ingrid Haebler, who took her rightful place in Philips's Great Pianists of the 20th Century series, died as we were preparing this issue for press, at the age of 93, and a proper appreciation will appear in the next issue.

Tim Parry, *Editor*

International Piano offers a rich mix of inspiration and guidance to pianists and piano fans around the world, from dedicated amateurs and students to professional pianists, teachers and aficionados.

Celebrating the piano in all its forms, including the fortepiano and digital keyboards, each edition of our magazine is packed with interviews, features, news and reviews showcasing the top artists of today and yesteryear. Practical advice for players runs the gamut from articles on technique and repertoire to learning resources and study courses, plus the latest developments in piano technology.

Our goal is to draw together the fascinating strands that make the piano such a popular instrument, enhancing every reader's knowledge and supporting those who strive to master its challenges.

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International Piano *meets* Federico Colli

BENJAMIN EALOVEGA

Who were your principal teachers?
Sergio Marengoni, Konstantin Bogino, Boris Petrushansky and Pavel Gililov.

Beyond your teachers, who have been the biggest musical influences on you?
I received a lot of musical inspiration from philosophy. The Italian philosophers Alberto Bonera and Emanuele Severino gave me precious advice on art, beauty, truth and knowledge, and on methods of analysing reality.

If you could take just one recording to a desert island, what would it be?
Mengelberg conducting Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

What was your most recent musical discovery?
For three weeks I've been obsessed with the piano transcription made by Grigory Ginzburg of Kreisler's *Praeludium and Allegro in the style of Pugnani*.

What was the last thing you were practising?
Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No 2, for tonight's concert!

Which solo piece would you most love to learn but haven't yet got around to playing?
Brahms's Piano Sonata No 3 in F minor, Op 5.

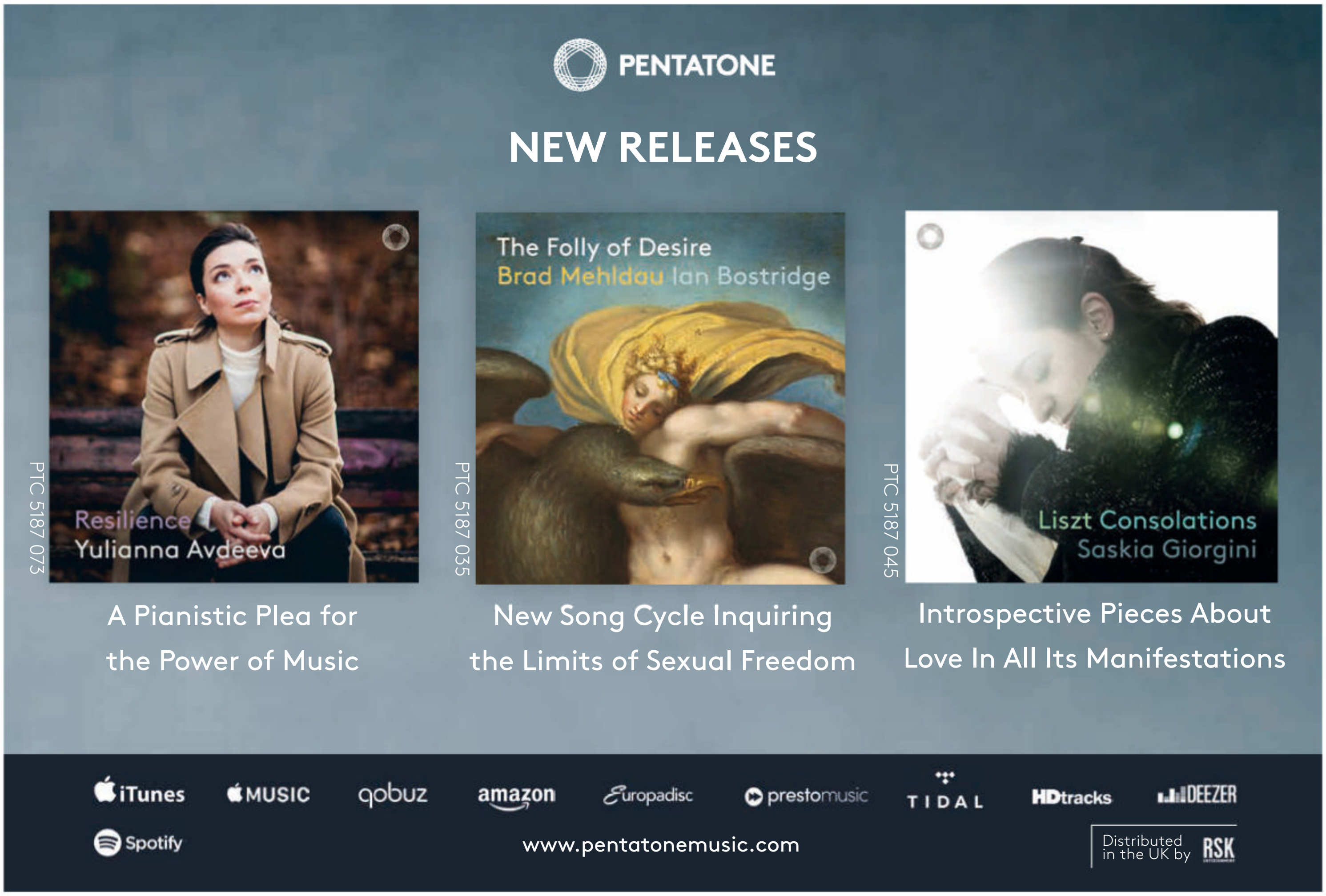
Which piano concertos should be heard in concert more often?
Rachmaninov's Fourth and Prokofiev's Fifth.

Which composers are the most underrated or wrongly neglected?
César Franck, Muzio Clementi.

What are the major works you're playing over the coming months?
Both of Shostakovich's piano concertos and Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 2.

Do you have a personal favourite of your own recordings?
I'd say no, because I'm always unsatisfied with my playing.

If you could have another go at making a recording, which would you choose?
A recording is like a photograph of a particular moment, one that will soon be disregarded, because an artist is always on a path of learning. Awareness of this gives me the satisfaction to accept the magical precariousness of that moment, avoiding the desire to change anything.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Inon Barnatan records Rachmaninov

The American-Israeli pianist Inon Barnatan has recorded a Rachmaninov album at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music for Pentatone. The unique part of this album is the first recording of Barnatan's own solo-piano arrangement of the *Symphonic Dances*, Op 45. Barnatan's cue is the recording of Rachmaninov's own playing of extracts from this piece for Eugene Ormandy, illustrating the new work before the orchestral premiere, a pirate recording – almost certainly made without the composer's knowledge – that was known about for years by collectors and was eventually released by Marston Records in 2018. 'It's one of my favourite recordings of Rachmaninov playing anything,' Barnatan has previously commented. Barnatan wrote his transcription during the Covid lockdown, using the time to learn notation software.

The rest of the album contains the Op 16 *Moments musicaux*, the three movements from Bach's E major Partita that Rachmaninov transcribed in 1933, the Vocalise in a solo piano version and the G sharp minor Prelude, Op 32 No 12.

Pentatone have scheduled the release for November this year.

Inon Barnatan has recorded a Rachmaninov album due out later this year

MARCO BORGGREVE

The piano world loses two greats of the 20th century

Menahem Pressler and Ingrid Haebler have died at the ages of 99 and 93 respectively. Our obituary of Menahem Pressler is on page 12 – he was best known as the pianist of the Beaux Arts Trio, a triumphant joint pursuit that curtailed a solo career. Ingrid Haebler cemented her reputation primarily as a great interpreter of the Classical repertoire, especially Mozart and Schubert. She recorded the complete Schubert piano sonatas and vast swathes of Mozart for Philips, and lived long enough to see a 58-disc box-set, 'The Philips Legacy', issued last year. An obituary will appear in the next issue of International Piano.

Ingrid Haebler

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

STUDIO NEWS

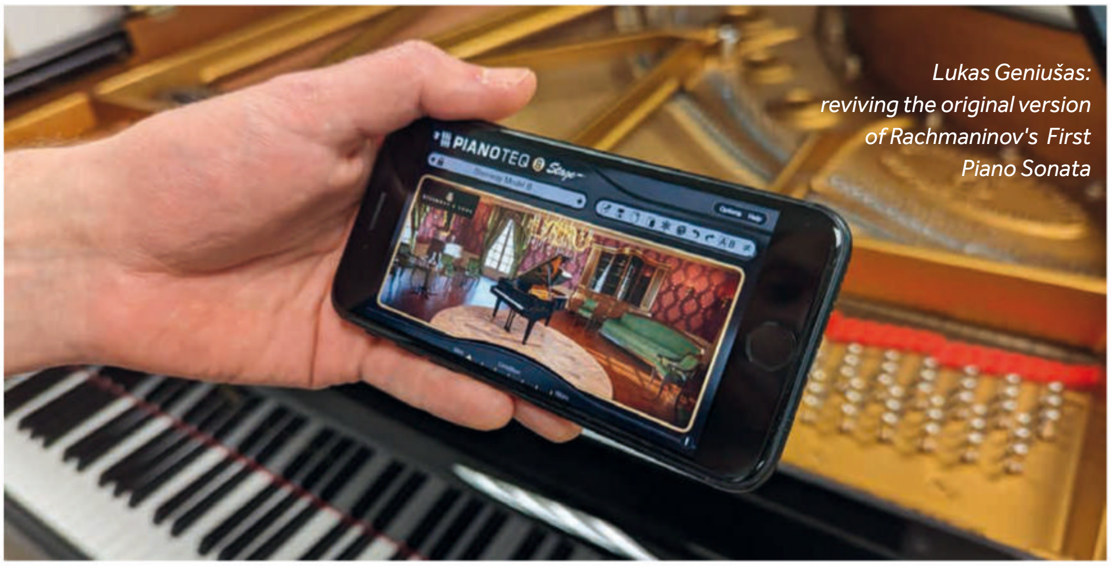
Peter Donohoe has recorded the Second and Third piano sonatas by Chopin alongside Rachmaninov's underrated *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, Op 22. Donohoe recorded Chopin's B minor Sonata for EMI back in the 1990s, an album that has long been out of print. Look out for the new album on Somm in October.

Llŷr Williams has been in Wyastone Studio in Monmouthshire to record two albums for Signum. A Schumann programme includes the C major Fantasie, Op 17, and *Faschingschwank aus Wien*, Op 26. And a Brahms album will contain the F minor Piano Sonata No 3, the *Variations on a Theme by Schumann*, Op 9, the D minor Variations from the Op 18 String Sextet, and the late pieces Op 118. Both albums will be issued next year.

Javier Perianes has just recorded Granados's complete *Goyescas* in the Auditorium de Zaragoza. Perianes has been playing this cycle in concert – including recently at London's Wigmore Hall (see our review on page 60) – and this promises to be an exciting release on Harmonia Mundi.

Hyperion has another in the epic Romantic Piano Concerto series in the can. **Simon Callaghan** has recorded the Piano Concerto No 3 and Konzertstück by Carl Reinecke, alongside the Piano Concerto No 2 by Emil von Sauer. Readers will recall the recording of von Sauer's First Concerto by Stephen Hough, coupled with Scharwenka's Fourth Concerto, which was one of the most successful releases in this enterprising series.

Modartt releases Pianoteq 8 for iOS



Lukas Geniušas: reviving the original version of Rachmaninov's First Piano Sonata

Modartt describe their award-winning virtual instrument Pianoteq as the fourth-generation piano, following the acoustic piano, the electro-acoustic piano, and more recently the sampled piano. Pianoteq is a modelled piano that you can install on your computer, available for Windows, macOS, and Linux. It can be used both in standalone mode and as an instrument plug-in. Towards the end of the last year Modartt released Pianoteq 8, with a new user interface, and have now announced bringing this software to handheld devices with Pianoteq for iOS.

HMV back on Oxford Street

HMV_GETCLOSER

The original central London HMV store will reopen later this year, following four years away from Oxford Street. The shop was shut in 2019 after the company went into administration, but after a takeover and having now returned to profit, the historic outlet – initially opened in 1921 – will reopen, while 24 new sites and 14 existing stores will also be similarly rebranded this year.

Opened by Elgar, and emblazoned for many years with 'His Master's Voice – home entertainment and electric housekeeping', together with the famed logo of Nipper and a gramophone, the shop became a retail icon, boasting a renowned classical music department. Ironically, while the web had caused major challenges for bricks-and-mortar shops such as HMV, the company credits the recent vinyl revival for its turnaround. LPs will feature strongly in the new-look shop, along with pop culture merchandise and technology.

Gramophone's centenary concert available to watch online

On Sunday 14 May, *Gramophone* celebrated its centenary with a star-studded concert at London's Wigmore Hall, Editor-in-Chief James Jolly hosting a memorable evening of varied music-making. Alina Ibragimova and Cédric Tiberghien kicked off proceedings with a gripping account of Debussy's Violin Sonata, while guitarist Miloš impressed in a new work by Mathias Duplessy. Fatma Said sadly had to pull out through illness, but was kindly replaced at short notice by the countertenor Iestyn Davies, who with pianist Malcolm Martineau gave compelling accounts of a trio of Purcell songs in realisations by Britten and Adès.

Highlights of the second half included a stunning group of songs from Carolyn Sampson and Joseph Middleton, culminating with Kaija Saariaho's 'Parfum de l'instant', and a mesmerising set by tenor Karim Sulayman and guitarist Sean Shibe from their recent album 'Broken Branches'. Among the pianists to play the specially provided Yamaha CFX were Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, who played two movements from Ravel's *Miroirs*, Martin James Bartlett, who played two Liszt transcriptions, and Bertrand Chamayou, who brought the programme to a close with a thrilling account of Liszt's *Venezia e Napoli*. The concert is available to watch on *Gramophone*'s website until 13 June.

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Youthful assurance

William Bracken has embraced a range of performances opportunities with confidence and enthusiasm. **Tim Parry** meets a young pianist who combines intellectual curiosity with expressive flair

On Tuesday 16 May, William Bracken stepped out on to the stage of Wigmore Hall in London to whoops and cheers from an audience full of anticipation. The near-capacity auditorium thronged with Bracken's fellow students, his family, friends, current and ex-teachers, in some cases people he'd not seen for years. One imagines that giving a Wigmore Hall debut while still a student would be nerve-racking, but the love and support for this young pianist was joyfully reassuring.

The recital was Bracken's reward for winning the Guildhall Wigmore Recital Prize in 2022, an annual award given following an audition by a panel chaired by John Gilhooly, Artistic and Executive Director of Wigmore Hall. This was a Wigmore Hall debut not only for Bracken but for the opening piece on his programme. Composed in 1828 but then lost until 1970 before being misattributed to the composer's brother, Fanny Mendelssohn's extraordinary 'Easter' Sonata had never before been heard in this hallowed venue. It's a major composition, a four-movement sonata with hints of Beethovenian influence within a highly personal idiom. Bracken then played four pieces from the Italian Book 2 of Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage*, the three Petrarch Sonnets followed by 'Sposalizio'. The second half began unusually, with a *sforzando* strike of the keyboard's very top note, the splintering sonority left to hang in the air. This heralded a stunning performance of Unsuk Chin's Étude No 1, where Bracken revelled in the explosions of colour he was able to extract from the Wigmore's superb Steinway. Such modernism, although this piece was composed over 20 years ago, was an apt preface to the culmination of the programme, reinforcing the still-shocking modernism of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata, composed over 200 years ago. This was a monumental performance any pianist would be proud of; coming from a 23-year-old still studying at Guildhall, it was a phenomenal achievement.

Bracken grew up in a musical family. His parents both studied the cello at the Guildhall, before moving to Liverpool in the early 1990s to play in the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. William grew up on the Wirral with music ever-present in the home. He began to play the piano aged four, and at the age of 12 he was accepted on to the Pianoman scholarship scheme, studying in London with Richard Meyrick. It was Meyrick, Bracken says, who 'inspired me to take music more seriously. After a year I thought this is what I want to do. I didn't look back.' Studies with Jonathan Middleton at the Junior Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester followed, before Bracken went to Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, where he has been for six years, studying with Ronan O'Hora and Martin Roscoe.

Both of these esteemed teachers are in the green room after the Wigmore concert, understandably proud but one senses more appreciative of an exciting concert by a colleague than merely satisfied at being part of his development. 'Quite some *Hammerklavier*!' Roscoe says to me warmly. He elaborates the following day: 'I've been working with Will at Guildhall School of Music & Drama for nearly six years, along with Ronan O'Hora, and it has been a great pleasure and a privilege to watch his development, from an enormously talented young pianist brimming with enthusiasm and curiosity, into a young

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DAVID MONTEITH-HODGE

At home on stage: William Bracken gives an impressive debut recital at London's Wigmore Hall

artist capable of playing with the greatest subtlety and finesse who also knows how to present the structure of the greatest works of the repertoire in an enthralling way. His natural confidence and exciting performing style are always, first and foremost, at the service of the music, yet there is now also a personal creative voice catching our complete attention.'

Bracken himself is clearly grateful for the experience of studying with Roscoe and O'Hora. 'It's been fantastic,' he tells me. 'They are entirely different in their approaches to lessons, but somehow they complement each other. They never step on each other's toes – they are of course great mates. It really works, and I've learnt an enormous amount from them both. It's great to be able to share a love of music with them. I've always thought that as much information as I can take from as many different people as possible the better. I take what I want, and leave what I don't want. The best thing is that they are both very willing to let me forge my own path. They'll give advice, and give their reasons, but in the end they'll say "it's your playing" and allow me to make my own decisions. They let me find my own voice.' Such is the hallmark of great teaching.

In May 2022 Bracken gave a probing performance of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto at the Barbican with the Guildhall School Symphony Orchestra and Adrian Leaper, and in November he won The Liszt Society International Competition 2022, impressing a jury that included Leslie Howard and Mark Viner. (Both performances are available on YouTube.) Since the music of these two composers is also on the Wigmore programme, I wonder whether they have always been of central importance to Bracken. 'Absolutely,' he says. 'My teacher Jonathan Middleton at Junior RNCM was a big Beethoven nut and I studied a lot of Beethoven with him. He was also a massive Liszt nut, but I didn't really get Liszt's music at the time. I think I didn't know the right repertoire. Then at the Guildhall I heard the Petrarch Sonnets and various other works and realised that these are all masterpieces. With Liszt and with Beethoven, there is something very direct in the way that they tell a story. They are both masters of musical rhetoric, and this is a hugely attractive quality for me.'

Another highlight of Bracken's fledgling career was a performance of Messiaen's *Turangalîla-symphonie* in November 2022, again with the Guildhall School Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican, this time with conductor Nicholas Collon, which also featured Cynthia Millar on the ondes martenot (has anyone played this gargantuan work more often?). Bracken played this vast score from memory – 'I wasn't always sure I'd do it from memory, but it felt right to be involved physically and visually with so many other people on stage,' he recalls. 'Memory has never been at the top of my list of worries,' he continues. 'I've always been very strong on the aural side of things. I struggle more with sight-reading, actually.'

After so much promise and early fulfilment, what comes next? Bracken completes his Master's this summer, but will stay on at Guildhall, continuing to study while also teaching on the classical improvisation course with Professor David Dolan, who has been a significant part of his musical life at Guildhall. Improvisation is important to Bracken, and the chance to teach in a familiar environment while performance opportunities expand is not to be taken lightly. At the moment, he is ambivalent about making records, although should the occasion arise he has plenty of repertoire ideas. For starters, only two recordings have been made of Fanny Mendelssohn's 'Easter' Sonata, and Bracken is confident he has more to say and can help spread the word about this little-known masterpiece. A&R executives, take note. **IP**

Menahem Pressler: an obituary

The pianist of the Beaux Arts Trio has died at the age of 99

Menahem Pressler, who has died at the age of 99, was a much-loved member of the Beaux Arts Trio throughout the ensemble's 53-year existence, a half-century that spanned a period of enormous change in recorded music, chronicled by a catalogue of pioneering recordings.

The Beaux Arts Trio formed in 1955, with Pressler joining the violinist Daniel Guilet and the cellist Bernard Greenhouse. They expected to give about five or six concerts a year, but their debut at the Berkshire Music Festival in Tanglewood launched a triumphant first season of 80 concerts. Renown came swiftly – both on stage and in the studio. A profile in *Gramophone* in 1978 summarised the group's strengths: 'The vivid and characterful performances that one associates with the Beaux Arts Trio stem from the happy combination of three distinctive personalities who share similar aims and ideals. Add to this three exceptional musical talents and the result is a unique chamber group that has been the cause of a worldwide revival of interest in the wealth of music written for piano trio.'

Menahem Pressler was recognised in the same article as being 'the most voluble and jocular member of the ensemble', his radiant playing reflecting his 'sparkling, ebullient nature'. Daniel Guilet was succeeded by Isidore Cohen in 1969 and later by Daniel Hope, while Peter Wiley and Antonio Meneses followed in Greenhouse's footsteps. But Pressler remained throughout, the foundation of the ensemble's identity.

Born Max Pressler in Germany, his family's shop was attacked on Kristallnacht; while he and his immediate family managed to escape Nazi Germany – ultimately reaching Palestine – his uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents were killed in concentration camps. At the age of 17 he changed his name to Menahem, the Hebrew word for comforter. Studies at Tel Aviv Conservatory led, in 1946, to a move to America and success in the Debussy Competition in San Francisco. Concerto performances followed – including his US debut, playing Schumann's Piano Concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy, at Carnegie Hall – as well as recitals, and by the time the Beaux Arts Trio was founded almost a decade later he was already a successful performer as well as teacher, having begun a long association with Indiana University. Pressler's formidable prowess in the years immediately before the founding of the Beaux Arts Trio is documented on several highly rated LPs he made for MGM Records, of music by Debussy, Falla, Grieg, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, which have become collector's items.

But Pressler's greatest legacy lies in the enormous recorded catalogue of the Beaux Arts Trio. The great piano trios of the Classical and Romantic eras lay at the heart of their repertoire: it was with Haydn trios that they won *Gramophone*'s Recording of the Year in 1979. Five years later, also in *Gramophone*, Robin Golding reflected on this recording: 'When they came out, the performances were immediately recognised as being of the highest artistic quality, backed by exemplary recording techniques. The completed venture must be counted as one of the most remarkable and successful achievements in the history of the gramophone record.' Beyond the core repertoire, including all of the major piano trios of the late 18th and 19th centuries, their recordings embrace music by Hummel, Arensky, Clara Schumann, Turina, Korngold, Zemlinsky, Ives, Rochberg, Baker and Rorem.

When the Beaux Arts Trio retired in 2008, Pressler – then aged 85 – did not, returning to solo performance. He later quipped: 'When I was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from *Gramophone* in 1998, I remember asking them if that meant I had to stop playing – because if that were the case I wouldn't accept it. Luckily they said I didn't! And after watching a solo recital DVD I made thereafter, one *Gramophone* reviewer commented that it was a pity I didn't start a solo career sooner. So that is why at this point in my life I am.'

Pressler performed in Germany on the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, and in 2013, aged 90, he made his debut with the Berlin Philharmonic, in Mozart's Piano Concerto No 17, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle. That year also saw the release of a well-received recording of Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert on La Dolce Volta. Other recordings, both solo and collaborations, followed, including a live recording of Mozart's Piano Concerto No 27, released in 2018, which prompted Jed Distler to praise 'Pressler's hypnotic legato, concentration and sustaining power'.

Pressler married Sara Scherchen in 1949 and they had two children; she died in 2014. His partner since 2016 was Annabelle Weidenfeld, to whom two years later he dedicated a Debussy album on DG. Listening to 'Clair de lune', Jed Distler found that 'one hangs on every note with bated breath, from Pressler's perfectly placed *pianissimos* to the disembodied shimmer of his ever-so-slightly desynchronised chords,' concluding that it marked 'an auspicious Deutsche Grammophon solo debut for this young pianist – 94 years young, that is!' **IP**

Menahem Pressler
Born 16 December 1923; died 6 May 2023

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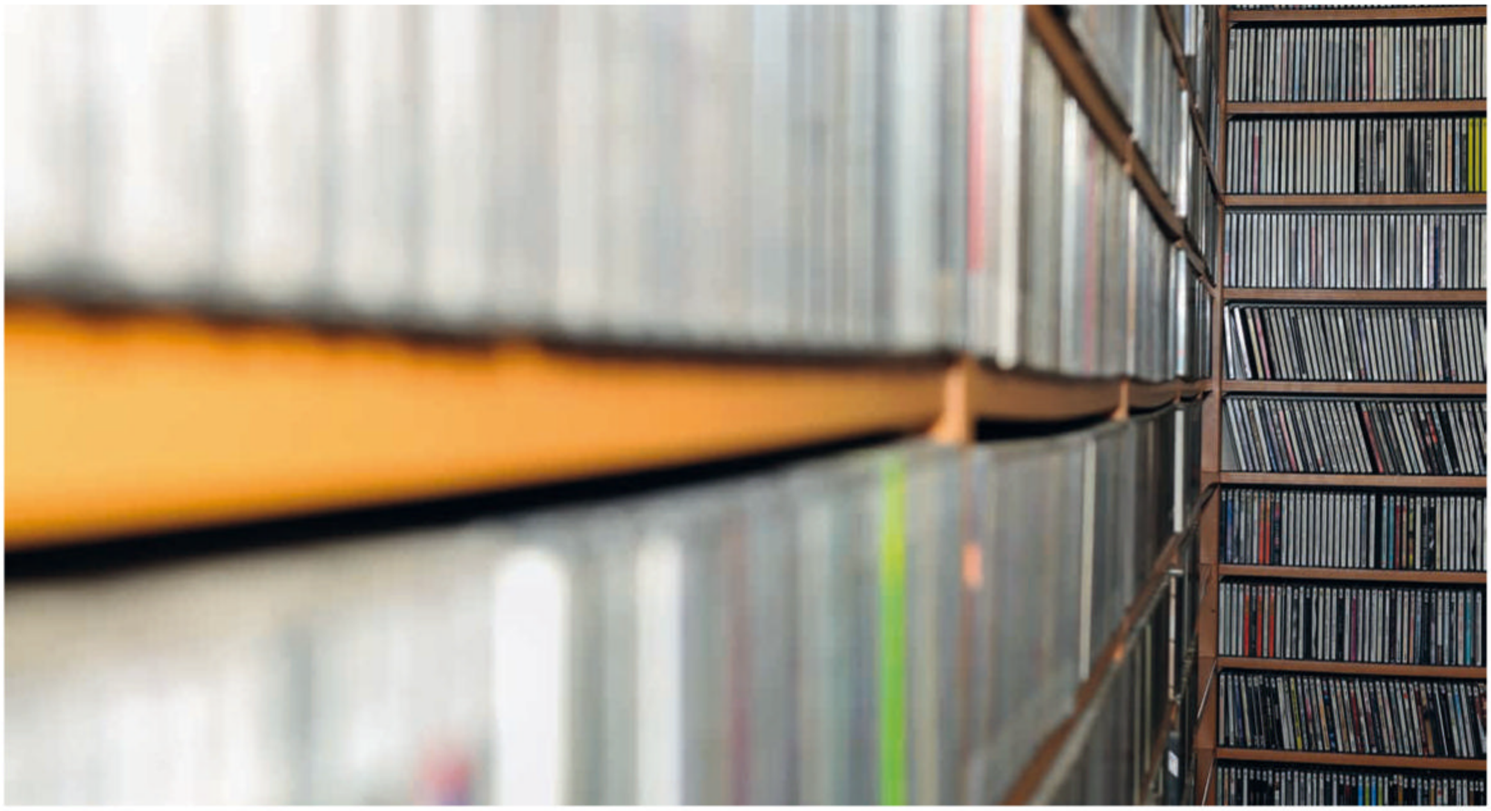
The *Ill-Tempered* Clavier

How do you organise your CD collection? **Charivari** finds his own system full of problems and contradictions but isn't sure how to fix it

This month, I shall adopt the persona of a first-class dinner party bore. I am going to tell you about my CD collection. Turn the page now if you want to skip it. I shall quite understand. What system have you devised to arrange yours? My system is fine as far as it goes but that, as will presently become apparent, is not far enough. In fact, I have a problem. Some years ago I sold off most of my LPs. Sometime later I got rid of hundreds of CDs I knew I would never listen to again. I wanted to refine my collection, so anything that was easily available on Spotify or YouTube – benchmark recordings of standard repertoire of every genre, the mainstay of the classical catalogue – went. A bit too drastic, if I'm honest, but I needed to use my limited shelf space more efficiently. I also – and this is the point – needed to organise my piano recordings in a better way.

Back in the day, it was so easy. As I was building my collection (78s, LPs and cassettes) I had a foolproof method of cataloguing. Each new composer I encountered or whose works I specifically collected had their own foolscap handwritten page. Each category of their work was given a page: orchestral, concerto, chamber, instrumental, vocal. Title of work on the left of the page; artists listed on the right. To easily identify each recording, 78rpm discs had a blue dot against them, cassettes were marked with a red one; 78s transferred to cassette had blue and red; any recording format with a piano roll was green. If the artist was also the composer of the music, or had known or studied with the composer, he or she was underlined.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With a relatively small collection, I could put my finger on whatever I wanted without any problem, cross-referencing multiple recordings of the same work because they were listed on the same page. There was also a separate artist folder in which particular pianists whose recordings I collected were cross-referenced in the same way under alphabetical composer.

This catalogue was abandoned some years ago when entering each title on box-sets of CDs became too time-consuming. Having been centred for decades on shellac, vinyl and tape, the collection was now predominantly digital, an experience shared, I guess, by most readers. There is now no longer a handwritten catalogue. In fact, there is no catalogue of any kind. Today, the recordings are arranged in a complex alphabetical system that has evolved rather than being devised. As already intimated, it doesn't quite work.

The piano part of the collection is housed in three units each divided into 10 shelves of an inch or so more in height than a jewel case. Working from top left corner from left to right:

Section 1: 78rpm transfers of pianists – all solo recordings of any pianist who recorded in the shellac era and beyond. *Subsection 1A* – discs with multiple pianists; *Subsection 1B* – piano duet teams; *Subsection 1C* – discs devoted to single artists arranged in alphabetical order, beginning with Eugen d'Albert and ending with Éliane Zurfluh-Tenroc; artists like Cherkassky and Earl Wild who had careers stretching well into the digital age have their solo 78, LP and digital recordings in one place. This rule is broken to accommodate the box-sets and loose discs of Horowitz, Rubinstein and Schnabel.

Section 2: Pianists of the post-shellac era playing (solo) programmes of multiple composers, arranged in alphabetical order beginning with Géza Anda and ending with Krystian Zimerman.

Section 3 (this is where my system breaks down): **Single-composer recordings of piano music** beginning with d'Albert and ending with Weber. Here, many pianists shelved in *Section 2* also appear in *Section 3*. And because I like to keep all recordings of certain composers together (Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt), some pianists also appear even in *Section 1* – Jeanne-Marie Darré, for example, Kentner, Rubinstein.

Section 4 (even less consistent than *Section 3*): **Works for piano and orchestra.** *Subsection 4A* – all the Hyperion Romantic Piano Concerto series featuring more than one composer ordered by the first composer on the spine; *Subsection 4B* – other multiple composer discs arranged alphabetically by pianist; *Subsection 4C* – single-composer discs arranged alphabetically by composer. Many pianists, again, should be in *Section 1* – but that would destroy the integrity of my concerto collection. On the other hand, concerto recordings feature on many discs and box-sets in *Section 1*.

So this is my dilemma: do I compromise the single-composer discs of *Section 2* and the concerto collection of *Section 3* so that I have an integral collection of all those pianists who made shellac recordings? Or should I keep all the concerto recordings together, no matter in what format? Should I go and see a psychiatrist? Or should I just get out more? **IP**

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CHRISTINE RECHLING

Lyrical Liszt

Saskia Giorgini talks to **Peter J Rabinowitz** about exploring the poetic side of Liszt's multifaceted musical personality

Exulting in Liszt: Saskia Giorgini takes her time in music rich in contemplation

'I have no idea what kind of pianist I am,' says Saskia Giorgini, with what I've come to recognise as her characteristically disarming laugh. To me, that confession comes as a surprise: of all the up-and-coming pianists I've heard over the past decade or so, she's the one with the strongest interpretative personality. Perhaps 'strongest' isn't the right word – 'most individual' would be more accurate. For in a world of escalating virtuosity, Giorgini stands out for the patience, subtlety and large-scale judgement of her work.

Let's begin with her large-scale judgement. The occasion for our conversation is the release of a new all-Liszt album on Pentatone. It's a follow-up to her earlier and enthusiastically received recording of Liszt's complete *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* – and it reveals the same preference for complete cycles, rather than individual pieces plucked out of them. Thus, the new programme gives us all of the *Liebesträume* rather than simply the celebrated third, all of the *Consolations,* all of the *Caprices-valses*, and so on.

Why? She offers a whimsical comparison: 'When I go and buy ice cream, I wouldn't just get one flavour. I would just get as many as I could. So why not do all three of the *Liebesträume*?' But there are, of course, more serious musical reasons for why she wants 'to have as complete an experience' as possible: 'I like the sort of musical expression that's eventful, where you come to understand that you have gone through a process. For example, *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* is powerful in this way because during the long time it takes to play the whole cycle, the music goes through changes and different experiences, and you go through changes, too.' She particularly appreciates the opportunity to expand her own personal development with music that's tied to emotions she has 'no personal experience with, like war or terminal illness. This opens so many intellectual doors to think about different approaches and possibilities.'

In addition, she points out, there's a formal argument for playing complete cycles: the way you play (and hear) a piece depends on its context, and when you uproot a work from its environment, 'it has a completely different feeling'. She gives *Funérailles*, from *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, as an example. '*Funérailles* on its own is very dramatic.' With her hands, she draws a huge arc to show its climactic peak. 'But if you have it in the cycle, is it really the climax? To me the climax is *Pensée des morts*: this was what gave birth to the whole cycle. If I think about *Pensée des morts* and *Funérailles*, I ask myself, "What are they about?" One is watching life and death, and getting some philosophical reflection on it in the end; the other is about human suffering.' Placing *Funérailles* in context, in other words, 'changes your perception of it. You will not play it in the same way. You will not go from zero to one hundred, because you have already come through so many things.' She continues: 'I have a similar discussion with people who say, "In *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, there should be more of a climax." And I reply, "Are you sure?" Because it's not the end – it's a moment, and then comes *Pensée des morts*.'

Giorgini not only sees the connections between pieces in a cycle – she also discovers unexpected connections among pieces that weren't published together. Her new album, for instance, 'was supposed to be shorter pieces, very romantic pieces, everything quite intimate'. But she follows the *Consolations*, the Waltzes and the *Liebesträume* not with, say, the *Petrarch Sonnets* (which would be a conventional fit) but with the two *Legends*: *St François d'Assise – La prédication aux oiseaux* and *St François de Paule marchant sur les flots*. I tell her that that's not what I would have expected, and that it lifts the recital's trajectory out of the ordinary.

She laughs. 'Yes, Liszt was a man out of the ordinary!' She goes on to explain how the *Legends* really do fit into the course of the programme as a whole. Yes, on the surface, they are more virtuosic: 'The *Legends* have lots of notes, and they are exhilarating; they are incredibly exciting.' But that virtuosity can coexist with religious experience. Hearing them is 'like when you look at one of the miracles, or you see these beautiful pictures of Mary, and you have the feeling of awe and religious ecstasy – that specific state of altered perception and euphoria that is described as happening to saints, when they have visions, a union with the divine, or the feeling of being at one with the all. In Romanticism, they had this idea, which tends to be overlooked, of religious ecstasy where you reached the edge of sexuality. Liszt was alive during those times. And the religious happenings like St Francis of Assisi talking to birds or St Francis of Paola walking on the water – these are miracles. How can you express them, if not with exultation?' This sort of virtuoso writing, the virtuoso approach to religion and religious ecstasy, 'is very close to the *Liebesträume*, which have these moments – as in No 3 for example – where it's the same sort of thing. It's just expressed in another way and addressed to someone else.

'I love the coexistence of the *Legends* – a man talking to birds – and these Waltzes, which are completely careless, just pure energy. Even the *Valse mélancolique* [the second in the set] has a sort of lightness. To me, they are all looking at the same thing, just from different perspectives.' Furthermore, she points out, in actuality the *Legends*, for all their 'lots of notes', are not stylistically 'very far from the other works on the album. They're not like the *Mephisto Waltz* or the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, not like the late pieces, not like the very serious religious ones.' Of course, Giorgini's is not the only way to play the *Legends* – but it conforms to her vision of Liszt as a man and a composer: 'I strongly reject the idea that Liszt is loud and redundant and not honest.'

VILLE HAUTAKANGAS

Her sympathy for long spans of music may have some of its roots in her childhood. 'My dad used to tell my brother and me lots of stories before going to bed, so there was lots of storytelling in my childhood, and also thinking about different ways of what could happen to a person. Because of this, storytelling is very close to my heart.' Add to this her preference for long novels, and you see a deep connection between narrative and the way she thinks about musical structure. 'Every piece has a sort of development: things happening, and then some sort of conclusion.' But pieces are different in 'the language a composer chooses to convey this. They are different in how much they go into detail, and how much they decide to give time to certain things happening, whether it's more about the content or more about the form or it's a perfect balance. What I look for is to have a perfect overview of all these elements.'

'My favourite occupation is to create as much difference in colours as I can'

Giorgini sets out these musical narratives with remarkable patience. Her playing is not always slow (although it often is); but she's never rushed, even though she consistently maintains a strong sense of momentum. I ask whether this reserve of patience comes naturally, and, again, she laughs. 'No. I had to *become* very patient. I'm very impatient, actually. So I have to discipline myself. To focus on patience used to be very unnatural, so I deeply enjoy having learned how to deal with it.'

This, too, goes back to her childhood: 'I was born in Torino to a Dutch mother and an Italian father,' she begins. 'We moved to the countryside when I was four.

CHRISTINE RECHLING

Practising has become a sort of therapy: Saskia Giorgini lauds the virtues of patience and understanding

From what they tell me, I have the impression this was because I was a bit hyperactive, a bit wild as a child. This is why I think they introduced me to music. My mom had read about Mozart being played to enhance the development of the foetus. So she always played music before I was born, and when I was one or two, there was always music in the house. And because I liked it – and liked singing a lot, I was always singing, quite loudly – they suggested that I start playing an instrument. In Torino there was a Suzuki school. It was mainly for string instruments, but one of the teachers was a piano teacher. And so I started with this method – very intuitive, with almost no theory.

'Practising has become a sort of therapy. It calms the thoughts, and you learn how much it is about the process. Sometimes it takes a whole year to get through one idea.' In fact, sometimes it can take a lot longer, 'Finally, after – I don't know – ten years, I understood late Beethoven. But it's nice when you notice that it sometimes takes a long time to mature and learn. It has a lot to do with self-exploring, and if you really want to get into depth with music, you have to deal with the choices that you make in your own life. It's very much part of a personal journey.'

Giorgini's patient attentiveness to the music's long spans does not, however, appear to dampen her interest in more local issues, especially issues of sound. Indeed, what I find most striking about her playing is its tonal quality: her gorgeous legato, her sense of colour, and especially her dynamics. None of this, of course, has come easily. To begin with legato, in her booklet notes for her recording of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* with Ian Bostridge, she calls herself an 'illusionist'. That was, she says, especially because that music is so 'sparse' – but I suggest that much of the magic of her playing more generally comes from the way she creates such seamless legato lines. The lack of sustain is, of course, a well-known limitation of the instrument, but, she says, 'it frustrates me less and less. The antidote is to create tension with anything that you have at your disposal. It's really agogic and timing control. Clearly the piano has a short life of sound, but it does have a line, and then chords and harmonies make some sounds that last longer than they would on their own. So once you develop an ear for that, you can work around it.'

And colour? 'I like to imagine an orchestra and lots of singing. So my favourite occupation, once I have an idea of how I want to do something, is to create as much difference in colours as I can.' Does this mark her as a potential Debussian? We'll find out soon, since as well as a scheduled album devoted to the enigmatic, dark pieces about grief that Liszt wrote late in his life, she's planning one devoted to Debussy as well.

Finally, with respect to dynamics: it's immediately evident from her crushing performance of *St François de Paule marchant sur les flots* that Giorgini is not a small-scale pianist. But she is a musician who takes *piano* – the dynamic marking as well as the instrument – very seriously. 'It gives depth to the range: the wider you can get, the more you can create.' She elaborates: 'I always imagine the process of playing a piece for someone as drawing scenery. You start by putting up the base, showing them the limits of the piece, and also of the instrument. And then you work within these limits. What *piano* can the instrument afford and what *forte* can there be that fits the music? Then everything is done within this area. I think it's an ideal to have it as broad as possible, so that things can happen inside. If something is very loud, and it goes to the most intimate *pianissimo*, you can die. It's important that you cherish those areas of expression.'

I don't want to leave the impression that Giorgini only cherishes those vast areas of expression where the colours are rich or where music goes from loudest to softest – she appears to cherish far more restricted spaces, too. My favourite moment is the one where, a few minutes into the First *Legend*, the chattering of the birds – already quiet to begin with – suddenly turns to silence as St Francis enters the field. It's a breathtakingly beautiful passage that crystallises the essence of her art.

Breathtakingly beautiful – and innocent as well. That innocence is also reflected in the photos of Giorgini holding and releasing doves that decorate the programme booklet for this new Liszt. 'I wasn't sure in the beginning,' she says, in part because, quite reasonably, she was afraid it might seem like kitsch. But then she was struck by the idea that, beyond its connection to the First *Legend*, 'the white bird is a symbol of purity or peace or reconciliation'. And that fits the collection: 'Even the waltz music is about comforting oneself and dealing with troubles, and digesting things that happen to you in life.' The process of going through the photo shoot – and here the idea of process returns – was a revealing one. There were a dozen or so doves. 'The first one or two, they just escaped, because I didn't know how to hold them. I was afraid I would squeeze them if I wasn't careful. Towards the end, I would open my hands, and they would not leave any more. They were very calm and soft, and they would just sit in my hands. And this feeling was completely new. And then I remembered, it's connected to childhood and holding puppies. Something very basic happened.' Something very basic happens when you listen to these recordings as well. **IP**

Saskia Giorgini's Liszt album 'Consolations' is issued by Pentatone on 9 June and will be reviewed in the next issue of International Piano

SILVIA PASTORE

Liszt Consolations
Saskia Giorgini

Saskia Giorgini's Liszt album 'Consolations' is out in June

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Strength and authority

In the latest of his series exploring the playing of great pianists who have admirers and detractors alike, **Bryce Morrison** considers the treasured recorded legacy of Sergey Rachmaninov

Venerated by virtually all pianists, Rachmaninov was the first to make a substantial number of recordings. That he would have made many more were it not for the obtuseness of the record companies he was contracted to is well known. Rachmaninov recorded for Thomas Edison, who – rumour had it – was deaf, and who objected to Rachmaninov's playing, mistaking his formidable mastery for 'pounding'. A request for further recordings was turned down. Later, Rachmaninov offered to record, among other things, Beethoven's First Concerto and *Waldstein* Sonata, and Liszt's B minor Sonata, but these were rejected by a 'suggestions committee'. And so while we are forever grateful for what exists, what is missing remains inestimable.

Just possibly, attitudes to Rachmaninov the pianist could easily have been influenced by those to Rachmaninov the composer, maligned for many years by all and sundry. Even his compatriot Rimsky-Korsakov was unappreciative ('forgive me, but I do not find this music at all agreeable'), while Copland later claimed that 'the prospect of having to sit through one of his extended symphonies or piano concertos, tends, quite frankly, to depress me. All those notes, and to what end?' Eric Blom, writing in the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music & Musicians*, notoriously dismissed Rachmaninov's music as 'monotonous in texture, [consisting] in essence mainly of artificial and gushing tunes', predicting that his popular success would not last. The response from Vladimir Ashkenazy was swift and acidic, with an enquiry as to when there would be a new edition of *Grove*. New York's Harold Schonberg, too, took ferocious issue: 'it is one of the most outrageously snobbish and even stupid statements ever to be found in a work that is supposed to be an objective reference'. Such estimates may seem absurd in hindsight but they contributed to the morbid image of a composer understandably subject to chronic depression and anxiety. Leaving Russia as the Revolution took hold left Rachmaninov traumatised: 'I left behind my desire to compose: losing my country, I lost myself also.'

Such biographical considerations and critical assessments of Rachmaninov's music need stressing because they ran counter to the sense of awe inspired by his pianism. Stravinsky may have famously described Rachmaninov as 'a six-and-a-half-foot scowl' but he had no reservations when it came to his piano-playing. For Josef Hofmann, the dedicatee of the Third Concerto (which, intriguingly, he never performed), he was 'made of steel and gold; steel in his arms, gold in his heart. I can never think of this majestic being without tears in my eyes, for I not only admired him as a supreme artist, but I also loved him as a man.' For Arthur Rubinstein, 'he had the secret of the golden, living tone which comes from the heart … I was always under the spell of his glorious and inimitable tone which could make me forget my uneasiness about his too rapidly fleeting fingers and his exaggerated rubatos. There was always the irresistible sensuous charm, not unlike Kreisler's.' Stephen Kovacevich also holds Rachmaninov's pianism in the highest regard: 'There is no disputing that Rachmaninov is the king. Even if you dislike it, he's still the king. There's nobody like him.' This suggestion of an unarguable and imperious authority is complemented by his reference to

Sergey Rachmaninov brought an immense technique to highly personal interpretations

Rachmaninov's recording of Schubert's Impromptu in A flat, D899 No 4. You may question an oddly curt and testy start, but you will surely be lost in wonder in the central section; for Kovacevich, 'this is not interpreting … this is becoming; it's devastating'. Mikhail Pletnev, too, sings from the same sheet. 'Rachmaninov is beyond easy definition,' he said in an interview many years ago. 'Think of it like this. Horowitz was a pianist. This tells you about Horowitz. But it is not enough to say Rachmaninov was a pianist. For me, he was music.' Pletnev was acutely conscious of playing that derived from the unique breadth of Rachmaninov's scope and range, his transcendental gifts as composer, pianist and conductor. Such richness and inclusiveness make a chapter heading 'the Puritan' suggest limitation rather than plenty. True, Rachmaninov could be austere, but he could also be caressing and warm-hearted. Listen to his recordings of his transcription of his songs 'Lilacs' and 'Daisies' and you will hear playing in which emotion is expressed in a gloriously full *cantabile*. He told both Gina Bachauer and Ruth Slenczynska that, in common with Chopin, everything must sing.

Rachmaninov's recordings are like an Aladdin's cave of awe-inspiring surprises

Rare dissent came from Claudio Arrau, who, despite his reputation as a diplomat, could be far from diplomatic: 'His playing (he sought desperately for the right word) was disgusting.' Arrau was even known to shake his fist at a luckless interviewer who had the temerity to mention Rachmaninov's name in his presence. Artur Schnabel's bitterness at Rachmaninov's immense success as a pianist stemmed from his sense that here was a musician addicted to entertainment rather than depth. Despising what he saw as a superficial repertoire including frothy encores, he once commented sardonically that he was the only pianist who plays a second half of a programme as boring as the first. To mention Rachmaninov when talking to Alfred Brendel is similarly ill-advised. Reservation also came from an altogether more surprising direction. Horowitz may have viewed Rachmaninov as a close friend but he was critical of the composer's performance of his Third Concerto (significantly Horowitz's own trump card and one, after some early reservations, celebrated by the composer in no uncertain terms – 'This is the way I always dreamed my concerto should be played, but I never expected to hear it that way on earth'). Horowitz's failure to keep his promise to play the First Concerto may well have come from a fear of comparison with the composer's own inimitable recording.

Again, it is difficult not to think of Rachmaninov's recordings as an Aladdin's cave of awe-inspiring surprises. His immense technique (he was not above practising Hanon, and also Paul de Schlözer's Étude in A flat, Op 1 No 2, later made famous in Eileen Joyce's early recording) was uniquely inclusive in terms of grandeur and sonority and, as Boris Berezovsky once put it, in its sense of polyphony, of an intricate sense of voicing and texture. There was, perhaps above all else, a powerful sense of direction, of music heading towards a culminating point, of mosaics that led to that crucial moment in the structure of the work (an idea he had inherited from Chaliapin, the great singer and Rachmaninov's friend). Who else has driven the Scherzo from Chopin's Second Piano Sonata forwards with such demonic rhythmic propulsion, with such a sense of destination? Or dared to take liberties in the same work's Funeral March, or ignored Chopin's *sotto voce* marking in the finale? (Rachmaninov's volatile and sinister whirl in the latter was later emulated by Cziffra and Katsaris, to take two examples.) Even if you don't always agree with the approach and question whether it's truly idiomatic, the musical strength and authority are unwavering.

Aside from the Second Piano Sonata, Rachmaninov's Chopin on record consists of a selection of waltzes, mazurkas and nocturnes with additional large-scale offerings of the Third Ballade and Third Scherzo. His D flat major Waltz, Op 64 No 1, is too alive with poetry and fantasy to allow for facile comments about minutes, and in its A flat major companion, Op 64 No 3, his music-making transforms a virtually strict tempo into a pattering and magical delicacy.

In his own music a tendency to hurry may have been dictated by the primitive format of the times, but there is also an occasional suggestion of diffidence, almost as if the composer had become distanced from his own creations. But what exceptions in the ebb and flow of the G sharp minor Prelude or in the *Polka de WR*, where his playing, for all its engaging wit, does not extend to, say, Cherkassky's mischievous charm or an idiosyncrasy close to the point of caricature – a quality alien to Rachmaninov's style. In his concertos he is lean and muscular, and in the once maligned No 4 (today, many pianists' favourite) there is not an ounce of fat, in musical or physical terms. Here, all of his razor-sharp rhythm and explosive energy pulse to recreate a sardonic masterpiece, more a baleful glance at new musical directions in Russia (exemplified by, say, Prokofiev's Toccata and *Suggestion diabolique*) than an attempt to move with the times. The opening of the Second Concerto gives us one of those unforgettable moments as, from Rachmaninov, it swings to and fro like a giant pendulum in an ever-widening and precisely judged arc. I think he would have been surprised and provoked at the tempos of modern pianists, whether brisk to the point of superficiality from Stephen Hough or slow to the point of absurdity from Lang Lang. He would, I think, have been much happier with Richter's slow yet cumulative movement in that same opening.

Among the many treasures within those all-too-few recordings is a tightly coiled performance of Liszt's E major Polonaise (the reverse of Percy Grainger's eccentric and flaccid alternative). Yet if I was to single out one performance above all others it would have to be the composer's own First Concerto, recorded with Rachmaninov's long-term partners, the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy. Here is playing of a clarity and verve beyond compare. Such a performance makes Rachmaninov the composer and Rachmaninov the pianist an inseparable entity (he always claimed he thought as a composer rather than as a pianist), the nobility and aristocracy of one reflected in the other.

Finally, I have the words of my own one-time teacher in America, Bomar Cramer, still ringing in my ears. 'You speak of Horowitz, but Rachmaninov was both a greater pianist and musician. His sound was like bronze; he was, simply, incomparable.' **IP**

Rachmaninov the composer and pianist were in many ways inseparable facets of his musicianship

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Remembering Sulamita

The Lithuanian pianist Sulamita Aronovsky fled the Soviet Union in 1971 and built a formidable reputation as a teacher in London. Following her death last December, **Michael Church** offers first-hand recollections of this indefatigable and inspirational musician

A hunchbacked figure with a pronounced Russian accent, a silver-topped cane and a flamboyantly Oriental head-dress: everybody in London's pianistic firmament knew Sulamita Aronovsky by sight, and many knew her personally. Her death at the age of 93 has removed one of the last survivors of Soviet Russia's pianistic golden age, who was also a *monstre sacré* – loved and feared in equal measure – in the overheated world of piano competitions. Everyone knew her story: she had left her native Lithuania for Britain in 1971, and had a car crash whose calamitous injuries ended her burgeoning career as a pianist; she became instead a noted teacher, and founded and ran the London International Piano Competition. Yet the intimate details of her story have great poignancy, reflecting her vain attempts to heal a lifelong emotional wound through symbolic acts of altruism.

Born to Jewish parents in 1929 in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas – her father was a doctor and her mother a dentist – Sulamita Ziuraitiene was a headstrong child whose talent was spotted by scouts for the junior branch of the St Petersburg Conservatory, which was forced by war to evacuate to Tashkent. There she was taught by Lev Barenboim, an offbeat but inspirational guru. The most talented young players were rewarded with a better food ration, but Sulamita traded hers for money to rent a piano on which she could practise. But the only time she was allowed to do that was by starting at 4.30 in the morning.

Back in Vilnius after the war, she married a young pianist, Kastytis Ziuraitis, and they had a son, Balis. Making ends meet in the Soviet style mocked by Shostakovich in his operetta *Cheryomushki*, the family – plus Sulamita's mother-in-law – lived in a tiny windowless room in the theatre where Sulamita was working as a ballet repetiteur. In 1953 she and her husband went on to study at the Moscow Conservatory, leaving Balis with his grandparents – a fateful decision that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

I once pumped Sulamita for her memories of the Conservatory, and surprises came tumbling out. As one of 200 student pianists, she slept in a dormitory where her most vivid nocturnal memory was the sound of munching under the bedclothes: 'Food was not provided at the Conservatory, and we were hungry. And we didn't want anybody else to see we had food – we couldn't bear to share it.'

She also recalled the day of Stalin's death: 'When he died I cried, as did almost everybody else at the Conservatory. The news came over on loudspeakers everywhere, accompanied by tragic music by Tchaikovsky. Nobody was overly bothered by the fact that on the same day Prokofiev had also died. Stalin was the father of the nation, the father to everybody, but Prokofiev was just a musician.'

She added that 'any kind of political discussion was considered dangerous. It was better not to have any. If we were careless in what we said, we were penalised – which is what happened to me later [when she defected to the West]. We all had to study Marxist philosophy, and for a time I believed in that too.'

Her tutors were in many ways noteworthy. Grigory Ginzburg pursued her amorously, to a point where she was forced to complain to the great Alexander Goldenweiser – a friend of Tolstoy and dedicatee of works by Rachmaninov. He tutored her instead, and profoundly shaped her playing. 'He was a very natural and honest man, who always got to the point,' she said. 'He had all the sonatas of Beethoven under his fingers, in his own edition which he carried about with him.'

Among other professors she admired were Emil Gilels, and it was nice to learn from her that his glowing pianism was complemented by the glow of his personality: 'He was a very decent and cultivated man, modest and considerate, and always ready to help people.' Other performers would hit the bottle after giving a recital, 'but he didn't need the extra stimulus of alcohol – he would just be sociable afterwards, in a very nice way'.

And she loved Rostropovich: 'Very charming and very funny. What impressed me was his piano-playing when he accompanied his students.' When asked about David Oistrakh, however, her face darkened: 'I was careful not to have much to do with him. He was a real Soviet man who toed the party line, and I and my colleagues did not trust him. He was a good musician, but he was working more for the government than for the Conservatory.'

Chief among the keyboard gods with whom she walked was Sviatoslav Richter: 'Very furtive, working obsessively through the night to "clean" his interpretations. Socially he wasn't easy-going – you had to approach him carefully, and never ask for details. He was a remarkable, commanding personality, and we all went to his concerts'.

Was he not also Shostakovich's favourite pianist? 'Well, it was difficult to say who was that, because Shostakovich wasn't very straightforward either – he had a very awkward manner. His best friend seemed to be one of my classmates, the pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva, whose repertoire was nothing but Bach and Shostakovich. She was very much a product of the Soviet system – very careful – and she remained so even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.' But Sulamita was awestruck by Maria Yudina, a Jewish convert to Orthodox Christianity who was a friend of Boulez and Stockhausen, and who was repeatedly forgiven for her criminal 'cosmopolitanism' thanks to the rumour that she was the confidante of Stalin. 'She was a huge woman who wore a big pectoral cross, and who made the sign of the cross over an audience before playing. When she played, you felt she was in charge of all Russia.'

Several of Sulamita's fellow students – including Lazar Berman and Tatiana Nikolayeva – went on to become global stars. Her best buddy was Vladimir Ashkenazy, despite their unpromising start in a competition. 'He was to play first, then I would play after him. When I first saw this little man, six years younger than me, I assumed that he wouldn't be much of a threat, so I felt quite confident. But then he played – and I knew he would become a great pianist.' He won the prize. Did she forgive him? She laughed: 'Of course, and we became lifelong friends. When I went back to Lithuania, he would come to visit – he loved the place. He was like my little brother.'

After graduating at the Moscow Conservatory, Sulamita went back to teach in Vilnius, but she soon had reason to bless that friendship with Ashkenazy. 'When I came out of the Soviet bloc and was trying to start a career in London – after my accident prevented my playing any more – I had no documents for my qualifications because the Soviet state had impounded and destroyed them in order to punish me – I was written out of history. And therefore I couldn't prove that I could still work at a high level. So Vladimir wrote a letter of commendation, explaining that despite my accident I was still able to function as a musician. That letter opened many doors.' A few years after that, Ashkenazy called and said he needed help. 'His eldest son Vovka, who was 16, had suddenly decided he wanted to become a pianist. Would I please teach him?' She did so for six years, with the result that Vovka made a career of it.

Sulamita's defection and her subsequent accident were only part of a huge gear-change in her life; her husband had died prematurely of leukaemia, and she had swiftly married Abram Aronovsky, a Lithuanian-born engineer from Leeds who was also her second cousin. Ashkenazy's support got her a teaching job at the Royal Northern College of Music, and in due course she moved south to take up a professorship at the Royal Academy of Music, under whose auspices in her Highbury flat she taught until her death.

Meanwhile tragedy had struck again. Her son Balis had followed in his mother's footsteps as a budding classical pianist, and in his twenties had successfully turned to jazz. But their relationship was never easy, and at the age of 37 he killed himself. From that point until the end of her life, Sulamita never once went back to Lithuania – her remorse over what she perceived as her failure of motherhood was simply too great.

In her elegant apartment in London, with its two big grand pianos, one ever-present object sounded a stridently discordant note: a beaten-up old rock guitar, wedged behind a sofa. She never alluded to it, and as with the car crash, visitors never dared ask about it, because there was no need to: that had been Balis's guitar. That was the symbolic key to all her work with students and competitions in the later years of her life. That was the key to the fact that, at any given time, she would always tend to focus on one talented and sensitive lost soul among her students, protectively trying to prevent them from going off the rails with drink, drugs or depression.

Her musical New Year parties were riotously joyful events, with gifts for everyone

The esteem in which Sulamita's judgement was held made her a natural choice for competition jury work and, given her drive and persuasiveness, it was no surprise when she set up her own. The London International Piano Competition was launched in 1991. It got off to a brilliant start – to the extreme displeasure of Fanny Waterman in Leeds – with Sulamita's old friend Radu Lupu officiating at the piano in the inaugural concert. In the course of its run – the last event was in 2009 – the roster of prize-winners, including Paul Lewis, Simon Trpčeski, Jeremy Denk and Behzod Abduraimov, was testimony to the calibre of its juries. And it was at Sulamita's insistence that a substantial part of the prize money should be spent on further study.

My own first encounter with Sulamita Aronovsky came about when I was summoned to a posh Islington restaurant where she pleaded the cause of one of her pianistic protégés and asked me to write about him. Her manner was imperious, but I didn't take the bait. However, I did eavesdrop on a masterclass she was giving at the Royal Academy, and she asked if I too would like a few lessons. My piano-playing had stopped at Grade 8, and I'd spent my life reinforcing bad habits, but as I was curious I said yes, and she clearly relished the irony of having a critic in her clutches.

Thus began a series of conversations stretching over many years with never a dull moment, thanks to her salty wit and worldly wisdom. And the lessons themselves, mostly restricted to Bach and Beethoven, were memorable. Every time I struggled with a new piece, she found an image or a metaphor – something vivid, down-to-earth or comic – that unlocked it; she never let me go home without a new idea. She had no intellectual pretentions, but her judgements had a cool Olympian authority.

Talking to pianists who look back with gratitude on her gruelling tutelage, I have found a rare unanimity, above all regarding her toughness. 'You had to have a thick skin to survive her acerbic tongue,' says Pamela Chowhan. 'On hearing my rendition of a complex piece I was proud to have learnt by heart, her dismaying judgement was "The memory is good … it's just everything else!"' Although Sulamita couldn't play for her students, she did occasionally illustrate particular points, as Ian Flint remembers: 'She once demonstrated a seven-note rolled chord from Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and it was incredible how much tonal and rhythmic artistry there was in the placement of those seven notes.' Chowhan also stresses how deeply Sulamita involved herself in her students' lives: 'She didn't just advise on how to play the piano, but also how to dress, how to walk on stage, what to eat, and importantly, whether one's choice of romantic partner was wise.'

David Fanning's memories shed revealing light on how Sulamita taught at the beginning of her residence in Britain. 'To start with,' he says, 'it was a case of work on tone production allied to mental and physical freedom (much talk of 'landings' and 'parachutes') and legato pedalling (featuring the 'crocodile'). The colourful vocabulary was partly a factor of Sulamita's recent acquisition of English, but it also served to forge links between technique and imagination. Occasionally it provoked humour – on both sides – that was released in cackling laughter. While playing a Bach fugue I was told, "David, do not touch the neighbours". I eventually figured out that this meant avoid finger-slips to adjacent notes.'

One such moment, Fanning says, had a profound and long-lasting effect on his development. 'As part of Sulamita's back-to-basics regime, I was set to work on Beethoven's Sonata Op 7. The slow movement, with its opening paired chords punctuated by rests, was an excellent proving ground for top-note balance, tonal blend both within and between chords, and rhythmic discipline. As I diligently strove to calculate the minutiae of all these requirements, I was instructed "David, you should improve the intonation". Hmm, how exactly …? The clarification came: "The first bar is a reverence" (as in a bow or curtsey). I got the point that "intonation" in this sense was to do not with tuning, but with intoning, in effect a special kind of eloquence. Thinking further about the passage in question, I realised that what I should be doing was not to think of two chords at all, however perfectly weighted, but of a single gesture: something not merely formal but human, evocative of lived experience.'

One of the brightest stars among Sulamita's more recent students was Nicolas Hodges, Harrison Birtwistle's pianist of choice and now professor of piano at the Stuttgart Hochschule. 'Initially I had assumed she wouldn't take me on,' he recalls. 'She sounded just too scary and high-level, but she did. She started by making fun of the mundane exercises I was doing, but my reactions were quick to what she gave me to do, and she liked that. And after a year she suddenly started to laugh – and it was because, she said, my hands looked just like hers. That was because I was watching so carefully what *she* was doing with her hands. I was once telling people at a party what she was getting me to do, with her in earshot, and she asked me to stop – she was very secretive about her method. She was never for finger-exercises or for talking about technique per se – it was all about colour and expression. And about strategies that made the music seem to happen by itself. About relaxation of the wrist, and the use of arm-weight. She wanted me to bring out the implied orchestral aspects of Beethoven sonatas, and with Bach fugues she never wanted the theme to be simply loud or prominent. It was all about character, and she might only work very intensely on two bars of a piece. It was a way of opening my ears to the music, and on getting the whole balance of the piece right.'

And intense was the word. 'At times when I was under pressure,' says Hodges, 'giving performances and entering competitions, I would go to her every evening at eight and work with her till midnight. And when I got home at one in the morning my phone would ring, and a voice would say 'Meester Hodges, tomorrow – Bach!' and the phone would then be put down. The same thing would happen the next evening, and the evening after that, and this could go on for a week.' And her standards would be stratospherically high. 'She would sometimes say "Meester Hodges, today is much better. *Today is lousy*." Meaning yesterday was even worse than lousy. She once played for me three pages of the Schumann Fantasy, and it was sensational beyond words. Afterwards I asked if it hurt to play that, and she simply said "Yes" and changed the subject.'

'And she was very kind when I was having troubles,' Hodges continues. 'She used to remind me that everyone has troubles, and the important thing was to overcome them, and still play well. I think of her almost every time I play the piano. There is so much stuff in my teaching and playing that comes from her.'

But Sulamita's lessons did not come cheap: must it not have almost broken the bank to pay for all those extra hours? 'She used to refer to me as her luxury,' replies Hodges. 'As the lessons piled up, the fees could have bought a new car, but my money was just not accepted. And that went on for years. Despite her ferocity, she was an incredibly generous woman.' One day, in an act heavy with symbolic significance, Sulamita presented Hodges with her dead son's concert clothes. Yes, saving that lost boy again.

Five years ago Sulamita's phone rang with an unexpected message from a producer at Lithuanian Radio. In their archive a collection of reel-to-reel tape recordings had been found in a box labelled 'Destroy', and each recording bore her name. That attempted destruction, she explained to me, had been part of her punishment for defecting. 'And when I listened to those tapes,' she said, 'I thought they weren't so bad.' That was typically modest: on the album now available under the title *Amity* (available as a CD from Bandcamp), her Mozart, Chopin, Ravel, Debussy and Čiurlionis – as a good patriot, she included a piece from Lithuania's leading painter-composer – are of a very high standard. Thus it became Lithuania's turn to honour her. 'At this late stage,' she said with a wry laugh, 'I am famous!'

Loved and feared in equal measure: Sulamita Aronovsky, here with her pupil Ian Fountain, was a familiar figure in London's pianistic circles

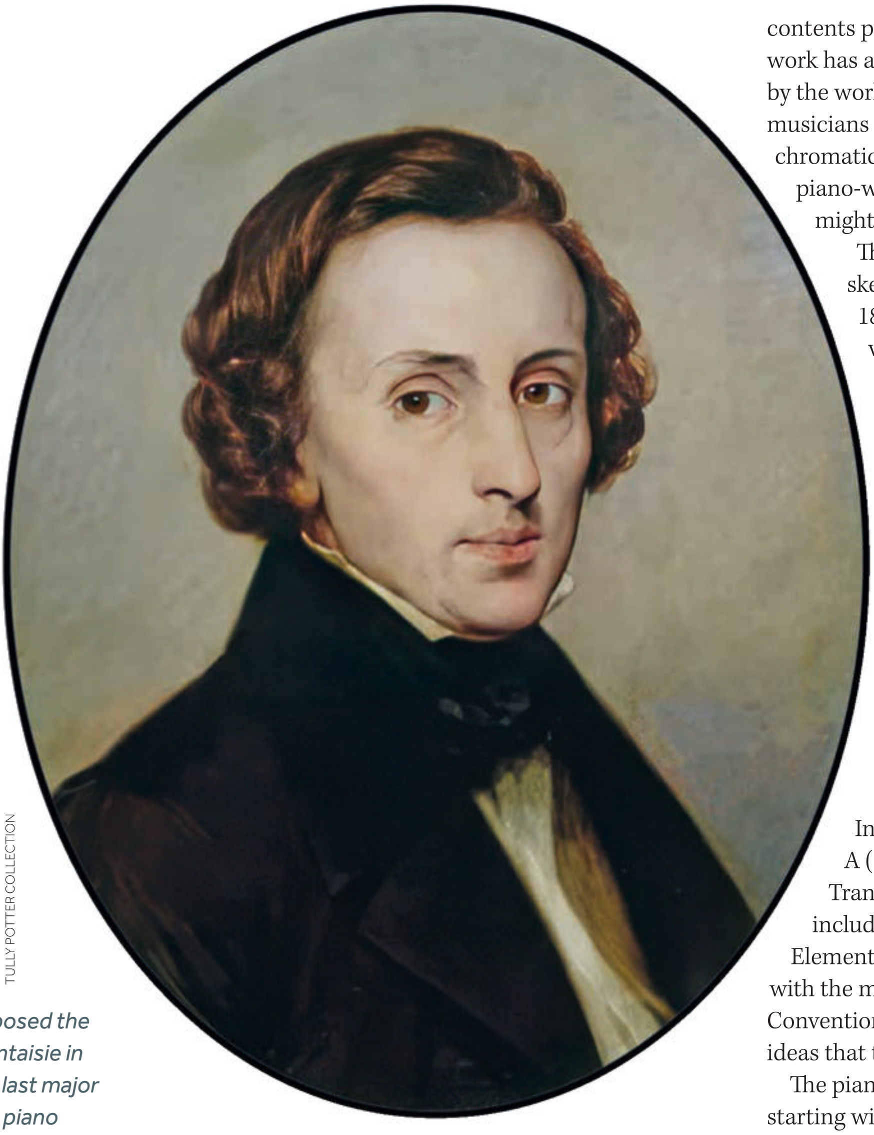
Now, this proudly self-reliant woman, who never complained of her infirmities and who stipulated that there should be no mourners at her cremation, has gone. Among her friends she leaves a host of memories of her kindness and conviviality, if also of imminent danger in the big old Volvo she insisted on driving with carefree abandon long after she should have been stopped. Her musical New Year parties – full of Russian and Lithuanian friends – were riotously joyful events, with gifts for all concerned. And as an unrepentant Corbynista, she was politically very much engaged.

Meanwhile, for generations of young pianists yet to emerge, she has left a more tangible legacy. Her entire estate – which, though she lived simply, was substantial – has been bequeathed to the Royal Academy of Music, to support its Piano Laureates programme. This is a new international project, designed to launch and support the keyboard gods of tomorrow. **IP**

Additional research by Zrinka Bottrill

Chopin's Polonaise-fantaisie

Charles Timbrell explores the history on record of one of Chopin's late masterpieces and recommends some listening



TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Chopin composed the Polonaise-fantaisie in 1845-46, his last major work for solo piano

The *Polonaise-fantaisie*, Chopin's last major piano work, is widely considered one of his finest achievements. But it was not always so. Its free, dreamlike sequence of sections can make it a bit perplexing on first hearing, and during the 19th century it was not much appreciated. Liszt, for example, disparaged the work as full of 'fevered anxiety', and Chopin's early biographer Frederick Niecks wrote that its 'pathological contents place it outside the sphere of art'. But today the work has a firm place in the repertoire, has been recorded by the world's greatest pianists and has been praised by musicians everywhere. Its original form and extraordinary chromatic harmonies, together with its very imaginative piano-writing, seem to point to a new style that Chopin might have developed had he lived longer.

The work's history begins with the extensive sketches made during an 18-month period in 1845-46. The piece took its final form in the village of Nohant during the summer of 1846, when Chopin was staying at the country house of his lover, the novelist George Sand (the pen name of Aurore Dudevant). She and Chopin were joined by their great friend, the painter Eugène Delacroix, who agreed to take the multiple autographs of the *Polonaise-fantaisie*, the Barcarolle and the two Op 62 Nocturnes back with him to Paris, where they were eventually dispersed to publishers in France, Germany and England. (The autograph used for the Breitkopf & Härtel edition can be found on the website imslp.org.)

The form may be charted in this way: Introduction, A (beginning at bar 24), B (bar 66), A (bar 94), C (bar 116), D (bar 152), E (bar 180), Transition (bar 226), A (bar 242), D (bar 254, including motif from Introduction), Coda (bar 268). Elements of the Polish national dance are combined with the more improvisational features of a fantasy. Conventional design is replaced by a discontinuity of ideas that the sketches show was deliberate.

The pianistic and interpretative challenges are many, starting with the opening bars. Does the first fermata refer to the whole bar or just to the chord under it? Are the arpeggiated figures written in small-note crochets to be played with rhythmic and dynamic inflections? How long is the second fermata and should one make an audible break in sound before each bar? Questions such as these abound, not to speak of the significant pianistic requirements.

The comments below offer a sampling of the more than 100 recordings currently available on CD.

ELIZABETH DELAGE

Left: Charles Richard-Hamelin came second at the 2015 Chopin International Piano Competition
Below: Finghin Collins recorded one of the finest modern versions of the Polonaise-fantaisie in 2016

FRANCES MARSHALL

Early recordings, 1933-1970

The 1933 recording by the Swiss pianist **Walter Rehberg** is included here because it was the first one. Although it is technically accomplished, it is much too fast and musically prosaic. Better is the 1947 account by **Alfred Cortot**, though it's a pity he didn't record it when he was in his prime. It's also a pity that he tried to squeeze it on to two 78rpm sides. While there are no cuts, the tempos are necessarily brisk and these result in quite a few wrong notes. But Cortot's tonal magic is everywhere present in the warm, deep melodic playing, the convincing rubato and the inspired poetic concept. (A recording from the 1950s on the Concert Artist label is wrongly attributed to Cortot.) **Stefan Askenase**, a student of Emil von Sauer, was a fine Chopin player and his Op 61 from 1951 holds together exceptionally well. This is mainly due to the fact that the B and D sections, which contain many beautiful moments, are not excessively drawn out. However, the final pages sound over-pedalled and rather choppy. **Arthur Rubinstein's** 1964 recording is his most satisfying version. The arpeggios of the first page are nuanced and they fade out like smoke into thin air. But I am not convinced by his treatment of the opening rhythmic figure as a relaxed melodic sigh. Later his playing is intimate and direct, with a lovely D section and ideal balances between the hands. The closing pages are fast and generously pedalled, sweeping us away with their *élan*.

Martha Argerich has always had *élan* to spare and her 1967 account boasts much temperament and colour. The B theme seems a bit fast but it features nice impressionistic touches. The closing pages are brilliant and may well set new records for speed and volume. **Adam Harasiewicz** won the Warsaw Chopin Competition in 1955 and has made many successful Chopin recordings. Things get off to a slow start in his 1968 account of Op 61 but his playing soon catches fire. He holds the work together with tempos that are not extreme, and his interpretation is full of poetry and passion, reminding me a bit of Rubinstein's account. Another excellent recording from the 1960s is by **Menahem Pressler**. It is memorable

JEAN BAPTISTE MILLOT

YOSHIE KUWAYAMA

Top: Nelson Goerner brings colour and imagination to his 1996 recording
Above: Severin von Eckardstein made a fine live recording in 2021

for its natural rubato, well-judged tempos, tonal variety, strong architectural projection, a lovely D section with fine voicing of the outer melodies, and stunning climactic pages.

Finally, we come to **Vladimir Horowitz**, who made three commercial recordings, all of them live. The first, from a 1951 recital at Carnegie Hall (Naxos), is a good representation of the score and of his relatively sober style at the time. This is much preferable to his 1982 playing at the Royal Albert Hall (RCA), which is almost psychedelic in its musical and pianistic excesses, creating a caricature of the piece. The version to have is from a 1966 Carnegie Hall recital. Here he is the master of the finest nuances and of every technical challenge; you can hear this in the first pages, arresting without exaggeration, while the B and D sections are coloured as a great singer might. Throughout there are wonderful contrasts of touch and a fine architectural sense. The passionate climax is not too fast but rather it is orchestral in its epic grandeur. The piano sound is warm and beautifully captured.

Also from this early period should be mentioned some out-of-print CD performances that can be heard on YouTube. They include fair-to-excellent ones by Shura Cherkassky, Halina Czerny-Stefańska, Sergio Fiorentino, Louis Kentner, Peter Frankl, Magda Tagliaferro and Alexander Uninsky.

The middle generation, 1970-2000

The 1972 recording by **Garrick Ohlsson**, made two years after he won the Warsaw Chopin Competition, captures the listener's attention right from the start with free and well-timed delivery of the opening ideas, the fermatas generating anticipation for what follows. The A theme is played with a sense of dignity and nobility, with fine nuances that don't call attention to themselves. The B section has a natural give-and-take, and D is especially lovely due to its simple delivery and perfect balances. The E theme is coloured with a tinge of sadness that we don't always hear. The tempo of the transition to the final return of A is effective, building gradually so that the arrival is grand and fulfilling, rich and unforced. This is one of the truly great versions, to put alongside his more recent account on Hyperion. In his 1973 account **Daniel Barenboim** might have played the first page with more freedom and shape but his tempos and balances are otherwise quite perfect, with deep projection of melodies, fine dynamic differences and a good, strong fifth finger for the right-hand melody at the climax. As one might expect from such an outstanding conductor, aspects of architecture and colourism are well realised. **Emanuel Ax**'s 1975 recording reminds me of Rubinstein's in its musically direct and natural delivery. By turns it is poetic, colourful and robust. It is well paced and with perfect voicing throughout, and it achieves fine climactic moments. **Vladimir Ashkenazy** displays a variety of nuances on the opening page, although the *agitato* in the A section could be less loud. The D section is quite slow, but interest is maintained by two generous but temporary crescendos. The transition begins quietly and rather slowly, building to a bravura climax.

The late **Fou Ts'ong** was a renowned Chopin player and his account of Op 61 from the late 1970s is full of special touches that set it apart. The A theme is not fast but rather deeply projected, whereas the B section moves along fairly quickly and with more pronounced polonaise rhythms than many players provide. The rhetoric of the C section is almost underplayed, and the slow middle section is rather free and rises to a *mezzo-forte* midway through. Fou makes us wait quite a bit before beginning E, which reappears as if in a dream. The transition section begins rather deliberately and *pianissimo*, building bit by bit to the grand final statement of A. Fou's interpretation is obviously deeply felt and commands the listener's attention without exaggerations or special effects. **Vlado Perlemuter**, one of Cortot's outstanding students, was a fine Chopin player. His recording reveals a direct, full-bodied approach, with perfectly judged tempos and an unusually clear polonaise rhythm in the B section. He sharply differentiates his sound in the *agitato* and *dolce* sections. D is not too slow and the melody sings out with due attention to the interplay with the left hand. In the big closing moments, however, his deliberate pacing and some of the balances are a bit of a let-down. On his recording from 1983, **Ivan Moravec** displays more temperament than I usually associate with him. The opening is perfect, with small inflections of the arpeggios and a breath of air between bars. He seems to really listen to the diminuendo of each arpeggiated figure before starting the next statement – which adds to the sense of improvisation this page should have. The D section is slower than most, but steady and with fine voicing, and the climactic statements are excellent.

The sound on **Claudio Arrau's** 1984 account is rich and natural, and the playing is bold and forthright, with deep melodic projection and perfectly judged tempos. The B theme flows and the polonaise rhythms in the inner voice are very clear. The D section is lovely and flows naturally into the E theme. The transition begins under tempo and builds in speed and dynamics to the magisterial return of the A theme, played with perfect voicing. **Peter Katin** in 1987 underlines the polonaise rhythm better than most in the B section, projects the melodies well in D and achieves subtle nuances without point-making. The big closing pages are fiery but the A theme lacks sufficient projection. Otherwise, he plays with admirable clarity and tonal refinement.

The *Polonaise-fantaisie* held a central place in the repertoire of **Sviatoslav Richter** for almost 60 years: at one time there were 17 live commercial recordings available. His performances from the 1970s and '80s are remarkably consistent, although the one from Prague on 20 July 1988 may be the best of them. The arpeggios of the opening page are rather slow but he makes us hear each note leading to the next. The A section is quite free and passionate, and the B section is convincingly rather fleet, with amazing lightness. The bars leading up to D are very exciting and almost impossibly fast but the anxiety calms down to a completely serene and simple delivery of the D section. The build-up to the final return of A is intense and thrilling, and the arrival is grand and broad, with perfect voicing for the thickly written texture. In the closing pages he plays like a man possessed, pushing to the edge of what is possible. He seems to be playing as if he wants us to hear what the music is doing to him at any moment, not what he can do with the music. All of these qualities can be seen and heard on YouTube in a wonderful performance given in Moscow in 1976.

The Argentinian pianist **Nelson Goerner** has won particularly high praise for his Chopin. On his 1996 recording he plays with colour and imagination from the very first notes. He also projects a keen architectural sense and this makes the first ABAC sections seem like one long paragraph. The D section sings with subtle inflections and E is very tender. His tone and voicing are perfect throughout, with a grand coda that is never too loud. Goerner's is one of the finest accounts. On his 1997 disc **Richard Goode** is never romantically excessive but characterises each section with understanding. He always supplies what is needed, with strong melodies that move with direction, colourism in the cadenza-like passages, perfectly paced D and E sections, and a very fine coda.

Since 2000

The interpretation of the American pianist **Barbara Nissman** is somewhat akin to Goode's but I especially like her opening arpeggio figures, with fade-outs that make me think of evaporating smoke. I also like the way she holds the work together and resists excessive tempos. Her playing sounds natural and flexible, with the part-writing clear in the unfussy D section. On her 2008 recording **Maria João Pires** starts with nice mysterious

ROGER MASTROIANNI

HARALD HOFFMANN

Daniil Trifonov (top) and Yuliana Avdeeva (above) both came to widespread attention at the 2010 International Chopin Competition, where Avdeeva won first prize and Trifonov third effects, and there are a lot of fine details along the way. But in general I find her tempos a bit too free and some spots are greatly drawn out, especially the E section. The coda is valiant, but it sounds like a bit of a challenge. The opening page of **Stephen Hough's** 2009 account is not quite atmospheric enough, and he adds an unwelcome 'comma' between the first two beats in each of the statements. I like his thin pedalling for the B theme, the tenderness at the start of the C section and the perfect voicing of the climactic return of the A theme. Despite these strong points, the many modifications of tempo and dynamics tend to sectionalise the piece. 'Patrician' might describe the approach of **Maurizio Pollini** on his 2015 recording. It is technically accomplished but the dynamics are often either too loud or too soft, with little attempt to 'orchestrate' the sound with a variety of touches. The recording reflects a literal approach and lacks sufficient temperament for this work.

Imogen Cooper the same year gets our attention from the very first notes and plays with colour and imagination throughout. The B section is lovely and the build-up to the magisterial return of A is perfectly paced. The closing pages are not especially fast but they are big and orchestral. **Charles Richard-Hamelin** won second prize in the 2015 Chopin Competition in Warsaw and his recording, made a few months prior to that event, is among the finest accounts available. The opening is rich and spacious, promising a personal approach that is sensitive to every nuance in the score while at the same time always moving the music forwards. Bravura and poetry coexist without calling attention to themselves and the work is held together unusually well, with mighty sonorities in the closing pages that are excitingly paced and beautifully recorded. **Finghin Collins**'s 2016 recording is one of the outstanding modern versions. He seems to really listen to each note on the first page, and makes us also do so. From the first A section to the end of the coda he plays in unusually long phrases, with natural rubato and flowing tempos. The D section is especially lovely and the exciting closing pages are shaped with unusual continuity. Equally fine is the live performance by **Severin von Eckardstein**, winner of the 2003 Queen Elisabeth Competition in Belgium. He projects each section as though it is part of one great flow of ideas, playing across the bar lines and increasing our sense of the work's improvisatory nature. Colourism rather than rubato characterises his playing of the D section, and the climactic return of A is full and rich, with unforced grandeur. A distinctive and remarkable interpretation.

I have saved for last the three top prize-winners of the 2010 Warsaw Chopin Competition. The *Polonaise-fantaisie* was a required piece that year and all three winners were captured live in their competition performances. The winner of the first prize was the Russian pianist **Yulianna Avdeeva**. Her account is indeed winning, with subtle phrasing, strong dance rhythms and real intensity projected in the big moments. D moves along with subtle colourism, and the closing pages are big and unforced. This is one of the finest recordings of the work. I am less impressed with the Austrian pianist **Ingolf Wunder**, who tied for second prize. His playing sounds monochromatic and forced at times, and the climactic pages are simply too loud, with little attempt to differentiate the voices. Much more interesting, musically and technically, is the Russian pianist **Daniil Trifonov**, who may have placed third but is the only one with a really major international career today. He projects total involvement with the music at every dynamic and tempo, and conveys moods ranging from very reflective to very grand – including complete command of the big closing pages, which never sound forced. His utterly musical, intense and communicative playing is that of one of today's finest pianists.

There can be no 'best' recording of a work that is by its nature open to an unusually wide variety of interpretations. But I will cite 10 recordings that I find very special, ones that I would not want to be without: alphabetically, they are by Arrau, Avdeeva, Collins, von Eckardstein, Goerner, Horowitz, Ohlsson, Richard-Hamelin, Richter and Trifonov. **IP**

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

1933	**Walter Rehberg**	APR APR7309
1947	**Alfred Cortot**	Naxos 8 111065
1951	**Stefan Askenase**	DG 477 5242GOM7
1964	**Arthur Rubinstein**	RCA 88697 68712-2
1966	**Vladimir Horowitz**	Sony Classical 19439 70438-2
1967	**Martha Argerich**	DG 419 859-2GH, 479 6068 or 486 0008
1968	**Adam Harasiewicz**	Philips 462 874-2PM2
1960s	**Menahem Pressler**	Doremi DHR7989/90
1972	**Garrick Ohlsson**	Warner Classics 476930-2
1973	**Daniel Barenboim**	Warner Classics 585453-2, 5419 73249-9
1975	**Emanuel Ax**	Sony Classical 88985 46504-2
1976	**Vladimir Ashkenazy**	Decca 452 167-2DF2, 480 7348
c1978	**Fou Ts'ong**	Sony Classical 19439 91309-2
1981	**Vlado Perlemuter**	Nimbus NI5209, NI1764
1983	**Ivan Moravec**	Philips 456 910-2PM2
1984	**Claudio Arrau**	Philips 412 610-2PH
1987	**Peter Katin**	Somm SOMMCD085
1988	**Sviatoslav Richter**	Praga Digitals PRD/DSD350 062
1993	**Garrick Ohlsson**	Hyperion CDH55382
1996	**Nelson Goerner**	Warner Classics 569701-2
1997	**Richard Goode**	Nonesuch 7559 79452-2
2003	**Barbara Nissman**	Pierian 0019
2008	**Maria João Pires**	DG 477 7483GH2
2009	**Stephen Hough**	Hyperion CDA67764
2010	**Yulianna Avdeeva**	Fryderyk Chopin Institute NIFCCD600/1
2010	**Daniil Trifonov**	Fryderyk Chopin Institute NIFCCD602/3
2010	**Ingolf Wunder**	Fryderyk Chopin Institute NIFCCD606/7
2015	**Imogen Cooper**	Chandos CHAN10902
2015	**Charles Richard-Hamelin**	Analekta AN2 9127
2015	**Maurizio Pollini**	DG 479 6127GH
2016	**Finghin Collins**	Claves 50-1719
2021	**Severin von Eckardstein**	Artalinna ATL-A032

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LUCA SAGE

Fantasy of dreams

Emmanuel Despax pays tribute to his literary family with a new album of nocturnal music from the Belle Époque

Emmanuel Despax: 'There is an unmistakable charm, sensitivity and melodic sense that defines this repertoire'

I have long thought of recording a programme of French music inspired by the night. This theme is perfectly suited to the inherent finesse, evocative poetry and incredible colours of late 19th- and early 20th-century repertoire.

My intention is to take listeners on a nocturnal journey through the Belle Époque. Living as an artist in Paris during this era must have been extraordinary: it was a fascinating time when the arts took centre stage in society.

Each of the seven composers I have featured explores different aspects of the night, from its romantic and dreamy side to darker, more nightmarish aspects. I also wanted to bring together well-known and lesser-played works, juxtaposing popular pieces like Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and Debussy's 'Clair de lune' with hidden gems such as Poulenc's *Les soirées de Nazelles* and Chaminade's Nocturne.

I love exploring unfamiliar works and introducing them to audiences. I find it an enriching and freeing experience because it allows me to disconnect myself more easily from the weight of pianistic tradition and revisit the score with fresh eyes and ears. I always seek to make a direct symbiotic connection with the composer, to start from scratch, to question all preconceived ideas, and to go back to the source – the score. I pretend I have never heard the piece before, whether it is a lesser-known work or a more popular one.

The album opens with my own transcription of Fauré's song 'Après un rêve', which also exists in a celebrated version by Percy Grainger. Although I love the Grainger, I wanted to express more of the text, which was adapted by Romain Bussine from an anonymous Italian poem. It portrays a romantic dream, depicting the flight of two lovers. To achieve this I have introduced a dialogue in which the register shifts between the soprano and tenor. I have also aimed to convey the idea of dreaming by adding a subtle recollection of the original theme in the latter half of the second verse, glittering softly on top of the texture like a faraway ethereal thought. The piece ends quietly with the original soprano line, signalling the end of our dream as we reluctantly awaken. It makes an ideal opening track, leading the listener on the first poetic step into the album's nocturnal landscape.

Knowing the poetry that inspired the works I have selected is essential to playing them. On the other hand, one should not feel confined by their meaning. Instead, the texts serve as a starting point to ignite the imagination.

Each of these remarkable composers put tremendous effort into portraying their chosen text. Take, for example, Saint-Saëns's symphonic poem *Danse macabre*, which Liszt loved. The piece encapsulates everything in Henri Cazalis's poem, from the 12 strokes of midnight to Death tapping on the tombs and playing his gigue on his out-of-tune violin (tuned to the devilish tritone instead of the perfect fifth). The skeletons dance, the rooster crows, and all the skeletons vanish. When you listen to this music with closed eyes, you can witness the whole gothic scene take shape in your mind.

In contrast, Debussy's evocation of Verlaine's poem 'Clair de lune' is a masterclass in transparency, fluidity, orchestral colours and, above all, sensuousness. These are the same qualities we find time and time again in his music, whether it be his orchestral writing as in *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* or other piano works like *L'isle joyeuse*. In 'Clair de lune', Debussy comes close to realising his musical ideal, which he described as being 'supple enough to adapt itself to the lyrical effusions of the soul and the fantasy of dreams'.

I believe Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* is one of the greatest works of the 20th century. The piece is tightly conceived but has an immense scope that broke the artistic boundaries of its time, both musically and pianistically. Every time I delve into the score, I discover something new.

Ravel's genius never ceases to amaze me. He brings 'Ondine', the seductive water nymph, to life by turning the piano keys into flowing water. The bell tolls chillingly and nearly hypnotically in 'Le gibet', with the slow pendulum of the hanged man evoking macabre imagery. Finally, there is the terrifying and elusive 'Scarbo', who haunts his victim by appearing and disappearing. I think it is inconceivable to play this work without knowing the prose poems by Aloysius Bertrand on which it is based.

Despax with his grandfather Jacques Charpentreau (1928-2016)

As a child, I was immediately drawn to Ravel's compositions. I felt I was able to see beyond the written score and make a natural connection with his music. That feeling shaped me as an interpreter and left a lasting impression on me.

The Chaminade and Poulenc works fall outside the Belle Époque period but I have included them to demonstrate the continued influence of that era on later composers. Poulenc is still a part of this great tradition for me. There is a lot of nostalgia in his music, particularly *Les soirées de Nazelles*.

Poulenc was often criticised (wrongly) for being non-progressive in his melodic and harmonic language, but that is missing the point and poetry of his music. He admired Satie and Debussy, and his piano mentor was Ricardo Viñes, a great friend of Ravel who premiered *Gaspard de la nuit*. *Les soirées de Nazelles* is a real masterpiece in which Poulenc succeeds in weaving a tapestry of human emotions into one large, cohesive form. It has so much charm, humour and sarcasm: each miniature portrait is wonderfully vivid and evocative.

Chaminade's Nocturne, on the other hand, showcases her masterful craft and elegant sensitivity. While I could have chosen works that predate 1914, I believe this particular piece represents her artistic and stylistic peak. On the surface, this is a delightful salon nocturne, beautifully poetic and lyrical, following in the footsteps of composers like Fauré. But she has such a distinct harmonic voice and approach to piano-writing – the result is exquisite.

Overall, I am astonished by how distinct these works are, despite being written in a relatively short time frame of just over 50 years. Each composer took unique approaches to harmony, style, structure and pianism, yet they all retain an unequivocally French sound. There is an unmistakable charm, sensitivity and melodic sense that defines this repertoire.

My album also pays homage to my grandfather Jacques Charpentreau (1928-2016), a French poet who was deeply passionate about art. He introduced me to poetry and literature at a young age and encouraged me on my artistic path. I vividly remember his warm smile greeting me backstage after my concerts – I could sense he understood what it meant to be an artist. We shared a subconscious bond, placing art at the centre of our lives. The difference was in the medium chosen to express ourselves.

As a student, and later in my twenties, I would visit my grandparents in Paris. I brought pastries and we drank coffee together, talking for hours about music, literature, poetry and politics. I admired his cultured intellect, his exquisite French, his memory and his wit.

The walls of my grandfather's study were adorned with countless books from which he always gave me recommendations. He introduced me to the works of great writers such as Victor Hugo, whose famous words on music guide and inspire me to this day: 'Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.'

I believe poetry and music are two sides of the same coin – or to put it more appropriately in the context of this album, two sides of the same moon. A poem has incredible musicality, from its rhythm and phrasing to its use of colours and intonation. Likewise, music is perhaps the most universal language, capable of expressing the entire spectrum of human emotions. Both art forms strip away the immaterial and seek to reveal the beauty behind the visible world.

For instance, watching a sunset can be a poetic experience, which can be conveyed equally through a poem or music. However, more than just conveying the experience, these art forms linger on its ephemeral aspects. They delve not only into the beauty of the experience but also into the multitude of feelings and emotions connected to it. The sunset might remind you of a loved one with whom you shared a treasured moment, or it might transport you back to childhood. Alternatively, it may trigger metaphysical thoughts about the origin and meaning of life. Suddenly a connection is formed and the experience becomes your own.

This is what I have always loved about music: its unique ability to express the rawest of emotions, to connect and speak directly to our common humanity, transcending all language barriers. This is what Debussy referred to as 'the naked flesh of feeling'.

As a tribute to my grandfather, I have curated a selection of his poetry plus works by other poets he admired to complement the music on this album. Like a bottle of fine wine that complements a meal, I hope the poetry acts as a catalyst for the listener's imagination, guiding them through this nocturnal landscape.

One of the poems I have selected is by my great-granduncle, Émile Despax (1881-1915), a fine writer from the Belle Époque. My grandfather gifted me a stunning first edition of Émile's collection *La Maison des Glycines*, which shares a similar style to Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la nuit*. Today, that first edition sits in my music room, alongside my Ravel score of *Gaspard*.

To me, my grandfather's poem 'Le piano dans la nuit' ('The piano in the night') holds the most significance and seems remarkably prescient for the entire album. He wrote it the year I was born so I have paired it with the album's final track, Duparc's *Aux étoiles*. Performing and listening to this magical work is a truly metaphysical experience. I envision myself floating in a sea of stars, making it the perfect conclusion to my programme. Here is an excerpt from the poem:

Listen to the piano
Like a singing voice
This slow lament
Is night descending
On the pain of the world
[...]
It's pity that weeps
And cradles the world
So that pain might sleep
For a moment a few hours
A mere few seconds
[...]
Caress of space
A few passing notes
Like a breath of air
Like a sigh of fire
Like a song of the earth
The grace the sweetness
The beating of a heart
Listen to the piano

Jacques Charpentreau (*La Poésie dans tous ses états*, Les Éditions ouvrières, collection Enfance heureuse © Jacques Charpentreau, 1984)

INTERVIEW BY OWEN MORTIMER

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Emmanuel Despax's *Après un rêve – Belle Époque: Nights at the piano* is available from Signum Records (SIGCD747) and will be reviewed next issue. ***emmanueldespax.com***

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VII – Speed (Part 2)

Technically, fluency can be severely hampered when there is an over-emphasis on single notes. Students who find it challenging to execute single- and double-note trills are often impaired because they are putting too much weight on each note. Effective trills can be built up in speed if they are practised initially in triplets. Feel each group of three notes as one. Diminuendo from the first note consistently. Within that decrease in volume, it is important to emphasise one note over the other. After you can successfully manage triplet trills in moderate tempo, increase the speed and (always with the consistent diminuendo) feel the trill in groups of six, 12 then 24 notes.

Honing your reflexes

Trigger movements and 'jump' practising are important for increasing rapidity. For heightened reflex action try playing with each finger in turn, jumping from middle C and landing silently a single tone up, then a third, fourth and so on. Feel the 'jump' as a single movement. Eventually this can be extended so that you use triads and octaves in trigger movements up and down the keyboard. As well as landing silently, jump practising should be reversed so that you start with your finger silently positioned on middle C then leap up or down to the next note, playing it when you land there. This is a significant and important way of developing dexterity and velocity at the keyboard as it reinforces the concept of a single movement being responsible for a two-note action. Telescopic practising was mentioned in the last instalment of this guide and is crucial for the development of effortless and coordinated playing at speed.

Everything is connected

An over-literal physical approach to connecting or binding notes together can severely impair fluency and dexterity in all kinds of contexts. If you feel you are digging into the keyboard then you risk losing horizontal flow, a sense of music unfolding in waves, and a sense of overall structure as one note binds laboriously to the next. It is much better to think of legato as a concept of connection that is applicable in the shortest of touches to the longest – from super-*staccatissimo* to super-*legatissimo*. Remember that it is the sound the listener hears that matters, and not the physical means by which the notes are produced. When this aesthetic is embraced wholeheartedly it becomes much easier to take the broad-stroke approach necessary for your pianism to flow more naturally, with less inhibition and less effort.

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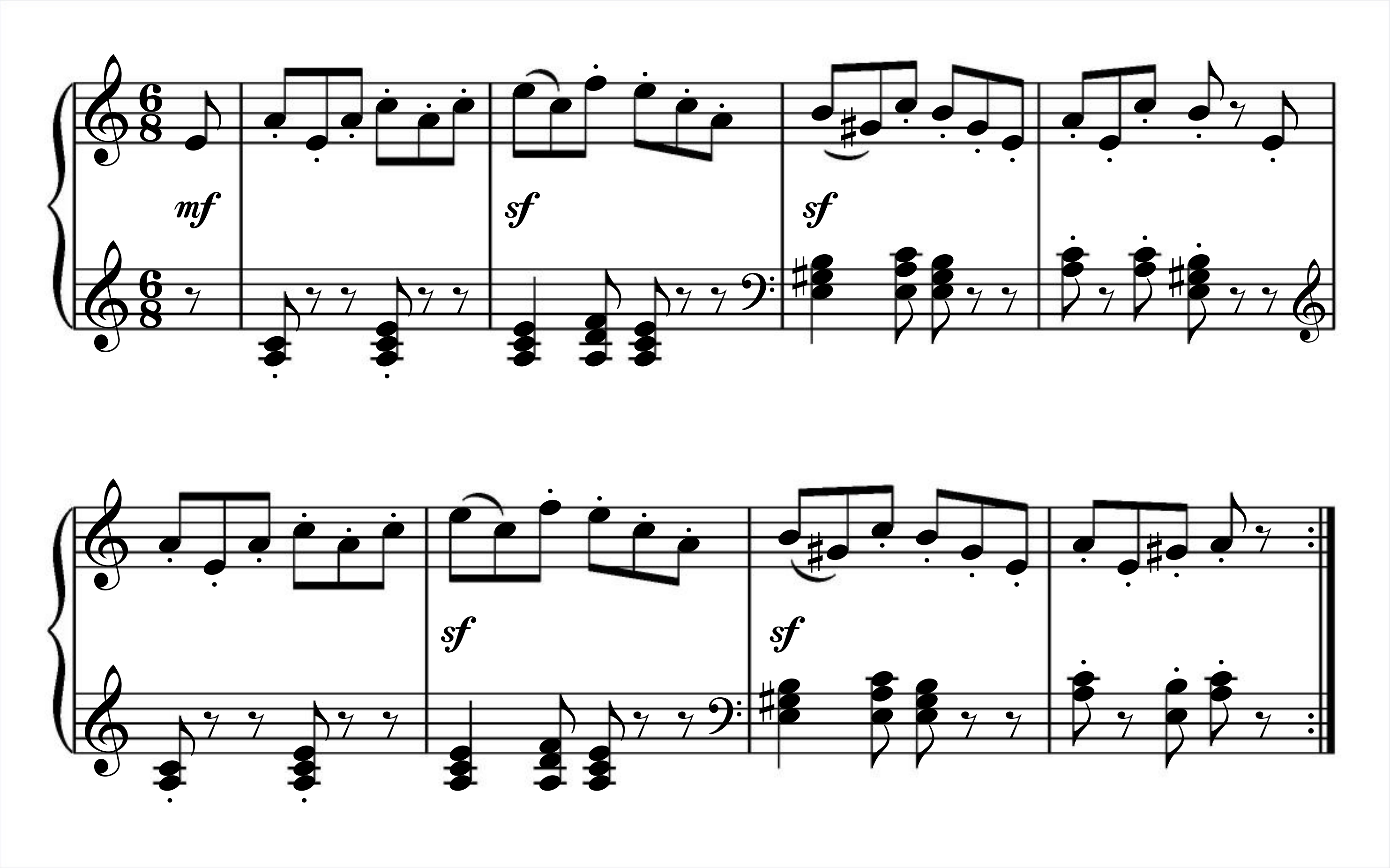


Example 1 ••• **Schumann** *Wild Horseman, bars 1-8, from Album for the Young, Op 68*

Avoid thinking of notes in solitary isolation:

1) Go through your scores with a pencil in the first instance and circle possible connections between notes.
2) Unify and connect by tapering away from the strongest notes in each phrase. Sketch this out literally on your score through the use of diminuendo lines.
3) Try connecting phrases by emphasising and binding together a strong note in each bar, or every two bars, or even every four bars, at the 'expense' of all the other notes played. This will focus your inner ear and give a sense of comfort and the feeling that the music is slower than it actually is.
4) Closely related to point 3) is the concept of highlighting an inner melody so that your mind focuses on slower notes within a busy texture, leading to heightened coordination and less emphasis on the less important notes in the passage.

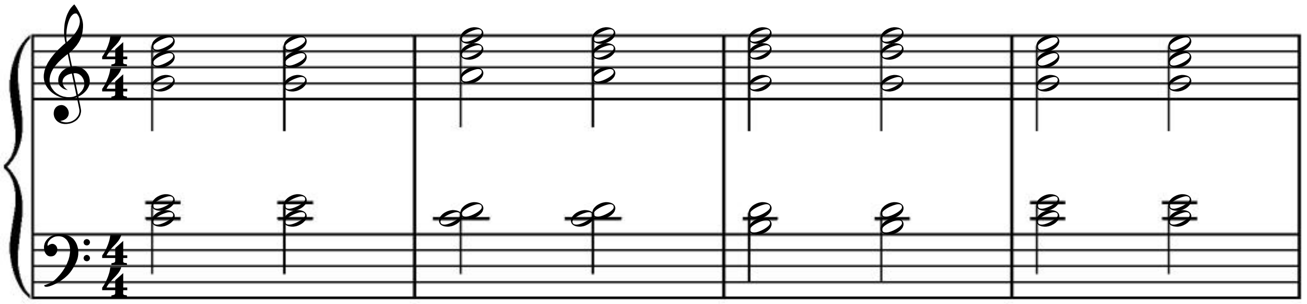
Of course, all four approaches above are as useful for developing musical sophistication (phrasing, shape and textural awareness) as technique (improved speed and coordination). Indeed, we should never forget that mechanical facilities should always be connected to artistic endeavour, and will remain uninteresting, even off-putting, if approached in isolation.

The speed illusion

Focusing on inner melodies and pivot notes in phrases certainly helps to control stress levels. So much of the issue with velocity is a matter of perception, on the part of both performer and listener. In the concert hall clarity and precision at a slower pace will always come across as being faster than fudge and muddle at a more rapid tempo. Characterisation and sense of direction will also make the music seem faster in delivery, even if not actually faster in terms of beats per minute on the metronome. The opening of Schumann's 'Wilder Reiter' ('Wild horseman') from his *Album for the Young*, Op 68 – see Example 1 – can sound laboured if each note is struck in isolation, or magically energised if the four approaches listed above are explored. Try lifting the left-hand triads out of the keyboard at speed. Project a sense of lightness and movement upwards with each arpeggio. Release rather than dig in to the keyboard. Such an airborne, quasi-transcendental approach to apparently harmless music can make all the difference between a rather indifferent rendering or one that genuinely thrills and energises.

Slow overlay

By focusing and connecting pivotal notes in rapid passagework we are creating 'compound tempo', whereby an inner slower pulse gives us something comfortable and artistically desirable to hold on to. Taking whole chunks of music in big, broad sweeps is key to understanding and deciphering scores more quickly and effectively. Play the harmonic skeleton of pieces. Map out the key changes. Try to memorise the broad chordal landmarks. This is easily achieved in pieces such as the first Prelude from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* – see Example 2 opposite – but should be applied to virtually every piece you study. Find the structural foundation of what you are 'decorating' and focus on that not only in the initial learning stages but right through to a performance itself.



Example 1 ••• **Bach** *Chordal skeleton of the C major Prelude from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1*

Speed and our emotions

Because we may have pressing deadlines or ambitious targets to learn specific repertoire, we risk becoming impatient, stressed, tired and resentful when practising. Why can't I learn this quickly enough? Why is the passage still insecure? What will I do if I cannot play this in time for the concert? If we work with target deadlines as priorities, then losing our love of the music becomes a dangerous possibility. The harder we try to do things quickly, the slower the progress tends to be. The more we agitate, stress and worry, the worse things become. It takes tremendous willpower to realise this and overcome what is unquestionably a negative phenomenon. In order to move fast we need to work in the moment, be completely mindful and focus completely on the notes we are playing. There is no space for thinking ahead. If we want to master any phrase in music then that phrase needs our devoted, total attention. Music demands commitment, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the speed of learning. Take time to savour and assimilate completely. Review, review, and review again! Stop looking at the clock. If you manage to make progress in just one bar in an extended session, then that is success. Approximate assimilation of a few pages over the same length of practice time is decidedly not progress in the same way.

Speed versus procrastination

But in any case, it is worth asking yourself just how long you think it will take to learn a new piece, accomplish specific tasks or indeed make progress in the way you hope to. Do you have a specific strategy for learning or do you simply proceed from one practice session to the next, stumbling your way eventually into a 'prepared' rendering? Of course, as pianists we are faced with a daunting number of notes to assimilate and come to terms with. It is all too easy to meander and put off consolidating fingerings, resolving technical problems and so on. Experience has shown that one of the most effective means of learning new pieces is to work in bite-size fragments. Work in half-bar units if necessary. Little steps forward are always the most effective if applied regularly and systematically. Rather than spending months playing whole works at less than half the tempo you would eventually like to adopt, try playing two, three or four notes at your intended speed, then stopping. Repeat this and do it with your eyes shut too, utilising short-term memory. If you can do this throughout a whole piece, resisting the temptation to play through the work as a whole to review how things are (nearly always unnecessary, even counterproductive in the initial stages), then you will be in an advantageous position to make the most rapid progress. Continue by taking a slightly larger fragment of music, possibly a single bar. Do the same thing with that. By the time you can manage two, four and eventually eight bars up to speed with your eyes closed (or if that is too challenging then simply without looking at the score) you will be well on your way to mastering the piece. The fable of the hare and the fox comes to mind – certainly a considered, thoughtful and comfortable aesthetic for working in manageable musical segments always trumps a more agitated, continuous approach in large units. In piano-playing we need to work, think and feel slow in order to play fast! **IP**

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Yevgeny Sudbin gives some tips on how to approach the popular Barcarolle that comprises 'June' from Tchaikovsky's misnamed cycle The Seasons

INTERVIEW BY JESSICA DUCHEN

PETER RIGAUD

Yevgeny Sudbin takes us through one of the most famous pieces from Tchaikovsky's Seasons

Tchaikovsky's piano cycle *The Seasons* was written in unusual circumstances. It was commissioned by Nikolay Bernard, editor of the music periodical *Nouvelliste*, with one piece to be printed in the magazine each month for a year. Writing them – they were composed in 1875 and 1876 – was not Tchaikovsky's first priority, so he had to ask his servant to remind him to send the latest episode to the publisher as each deadline approached. Some people think he didn't put much effort into them, or that they're not as sophisticated as some of his other works. Yet even if the music appears simple at first glance, it has a lot of depth. Today, along with the November 'Troika', the June 'Barcarolle' is probably the most famous.

The title 'Barcarolle' suggests a gondolier's song, which indicates the rhythmic flow. This rocking rhythm provides the harmonic pillow on which the melody rests. Whatever the right hand does, the left hand never interferes with it. Besides supporting the melody, it's a good anchor to help us understand the piece's harmonic structure. This knowledge can help you avoid getting bogged down in detail, or not seeing the wood for the trees.

We have here a very expressive melody in the right hand. Tchaikovsky is an incredibly unusual composer in that he always lays bare the emotion, sometimes so much that some people find it almost uncomfortable to play. That can pose certain interpretational challenges. There's a simplicity that is very important, because the underlying emotion is so strong that any gestures, unnecessary rubatos or interruptions risk breaking up its natural flow.

This music is not very complex harmonically, so it's appropriate to approach it in a relatively simple way, a little bit like Mozart. The emotions should flow straight through you into the keys. Each phrase has an archlike structure (eg the melody up to bar 6) and it's a good idea to find one point of inflection within that arch where the tension focuses, then relaxes; you can release it without too much rubato, and the left hand's constant rhythm doesn't leave you much time for that in any case. Excessive rubato could interfere with the expression of emotion: that lies in the notes and between the notes, and it will speak for itself.

You can work on achieving a good singing tone by practising without pedal, feeling the legato with each finger going deep into the keys. The fingers can feel as if they are stretching rubber. A really beautiful legato in the right hand, underpinned by the harmonic world of the left hand, will help to create an uninterrupted, threadlike feeling through the piece.

Going into the major (at bar 13), the music can feel more hopeful, so it's important not to drop the tempo. It's as if that natural, interweaving thread continues throughout and you never feel there's a break to it. When you play, have in mind the harmonic architecture of the piece and use that as your tool of expression. If you follow the harmonies, it becomes obvious where those points of tension fall, eg bar 22. Sometimes the arc is not symmetrical, and the point of inflection and its commensurate release are as late as possible. This occurs, for example, in bar 31, where the music is about to meld into G major.

The middle section is a rustic Russian dance, where the tempo picks up and the mist seems to dissipate. The fifths (at bar 32) are almost like a folk song's background drone on wind instruments. This transition, however, can be quite tricky. I think the *più mosso* starts gradually and then grows, almost like when people start to dance and then suddenly everybody is dancing! The syncopations (bars 32-39) should not be rushed – the right hand may be pushing forwards but the left hand is almost holding it back. But once the dance really gets going (bar 40), it rolls like a massive ball of snow that keeps going in full swing, not really stopping even at the fermata (bar 51), which is still full of tension. I take the top note of the upward flourish (bar 51) in the left hand; I like the top G to sound a little more separated and this can be a comfortable way to do that. The dance doesn't truly stop until the dominant chord at bar 53.

When the theme returns, certain editions indicate rolling some of the chords. I don't like this at all – again, because it can sound fussy and it interrupts the flow of the emotion. The music doesn't need any extra labouring in order to sound expressive. It's a question of how to balance the expressiveness with simplicity, which can be quite difficult to achieve.

> *'One of the most important things in a piece like this is voicing, especially in the chords'*

ADOBE STOCK

Tchaikovsky composed a movement each month

In the recapitulation, an extra voice appears in the left hand, tenor register (beginning at bars 54-55). It's typical in Russian singing that a countermelody comes in alongside the main one; the voice doesn't take over, it doesn't interrupt the right hand, it just supports it. As you shift the left hand up to play this new voice, try to keep the wrist very relaxed.

I do take a bit of time over the change of harmony in bar 78, which I find rather special, like a reminiscence of what has gone before; but again, it's important not to exaggerate it. There can be a little bit of separation between the right and left hands here, though when you have these expressive moments, the flow has to resume quickly and naturally.

One of the most important things in a piece like this is voicing, especially in the chords: within them, you need very high-quality control of the voicing, otherwise everything can start to fall apart. The pedal is there to add colour. I never put it down completely, though I do sometimes take it off: I play the middle *allegro giocoso* section dry, but the G major passage is more mysterious, so there's always half pedal, quarter, eighths, many degrees. Pedalling is not something you can really explain: you can only do it with your ears.

The last section (starting at bar 83) is a little bit like the 'Sugar Plum Fairy' in *The Nutcracker*. The voicing is crucial and together with the pedal it can make this a special, magical moment. The emphasis subtly shifts into the weak beats – it's the inverse of the syncopation in the middle section. In the right hand (bars 83-85), I put more emphasis on the line in the thumb; the top note can have some sparkle, yet without interrupting. There are some moments of reflective harmony that add more poignancy, and places in the left hand where I play a phrase almost non-legato (eg bars 86-87) so it feels as if it's closing upon itself. It's good to vary the pedal so that it's not too smudgy and can offer clarity in some of the voices.

Eventually the music disappears into nothingness, via a coda several lines long. No *accelerando* is written in the last line or two, but if you try playing it without some *accelerando*, it can sound banal. When you can ease into the composer's thoughts, when there are not too many editorial instructions, you can sense the unmarked expression that develops organically in the score, whether it's a question of touch, pedal, articulation or even taking a bit of time somewhere.

Occasionally, musical problems are simply technical problems. Sometimes for a phrase to make sense, all you need to do is change the way you move your wrist. Or, if you raise your shoulder, if you lock your elbow or your wrist, that's where the flow gets stuck. The expression and the signal should go straight from either your shoulder or your back into the bottom of the key.

I do most of my practice without pedal, just using my ears and my fingers, making sure my muscles can feel the melody. It's a slow motion, t'ai chi type of practice, where you can really listen to every note. After that, it's much easier when you do add pedal.

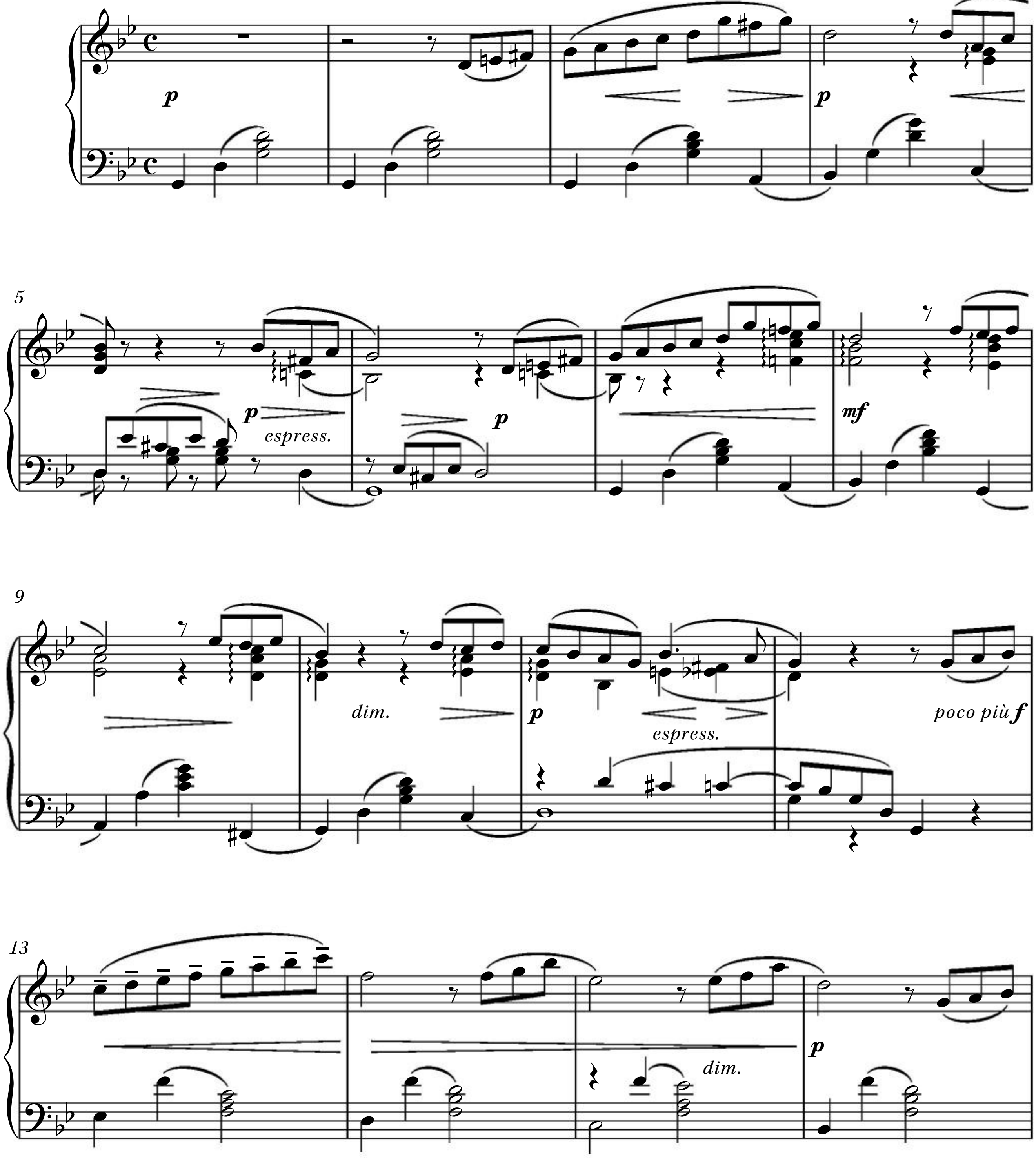
I feel it's good to 'rewind' your ears and start afresh. Go back to the basics with your practice and work on the legato, the voicing, your muscular feeling in each note and each phrase. Then when you perform, you can be totally spontaneous because your muscles will feel what they should be doing – and you can concentrate on making music. **IP**

June

Barcarolle

P. Tchaikovsky
Op. 37, No. 6

Andante cantabile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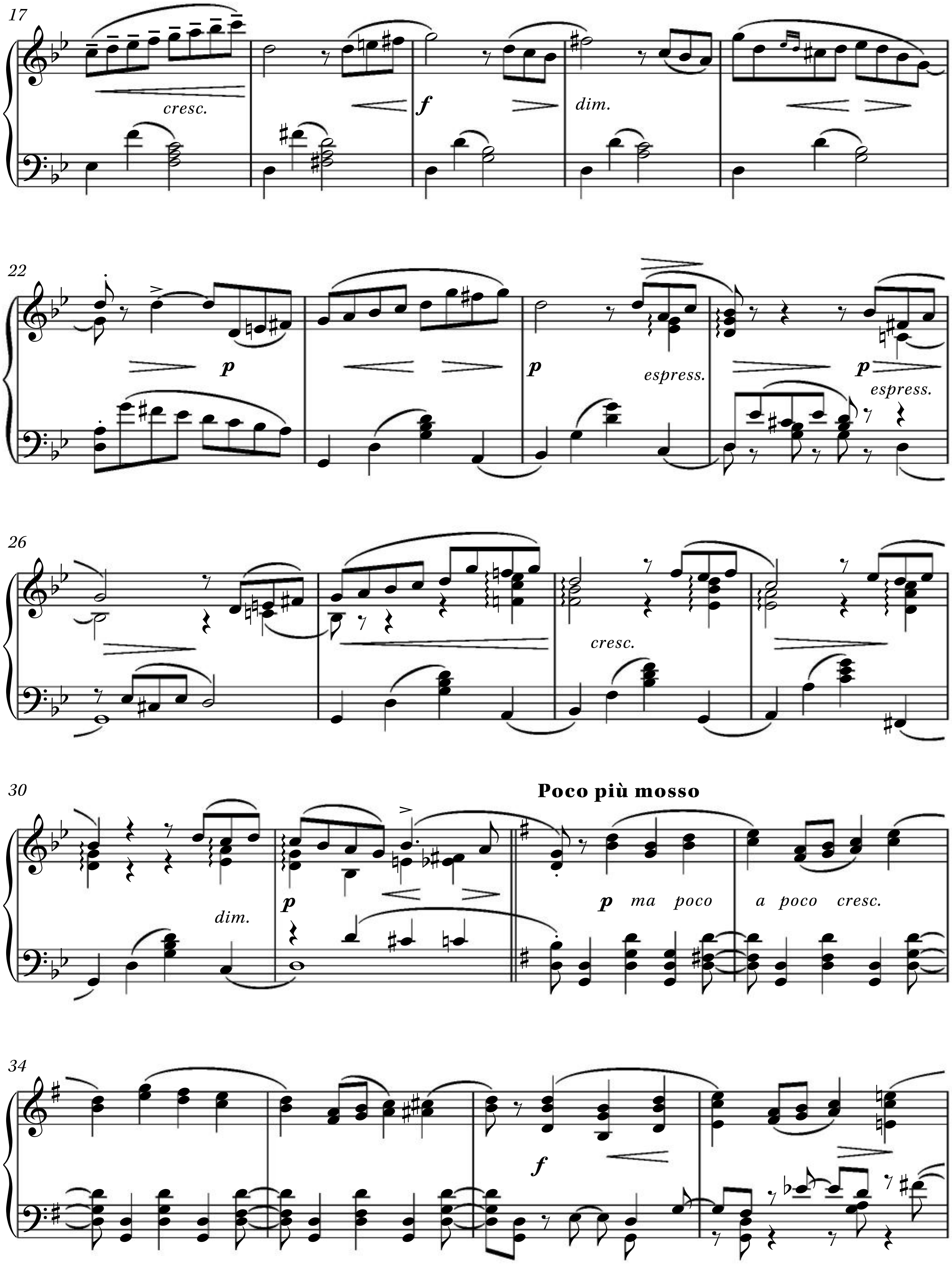
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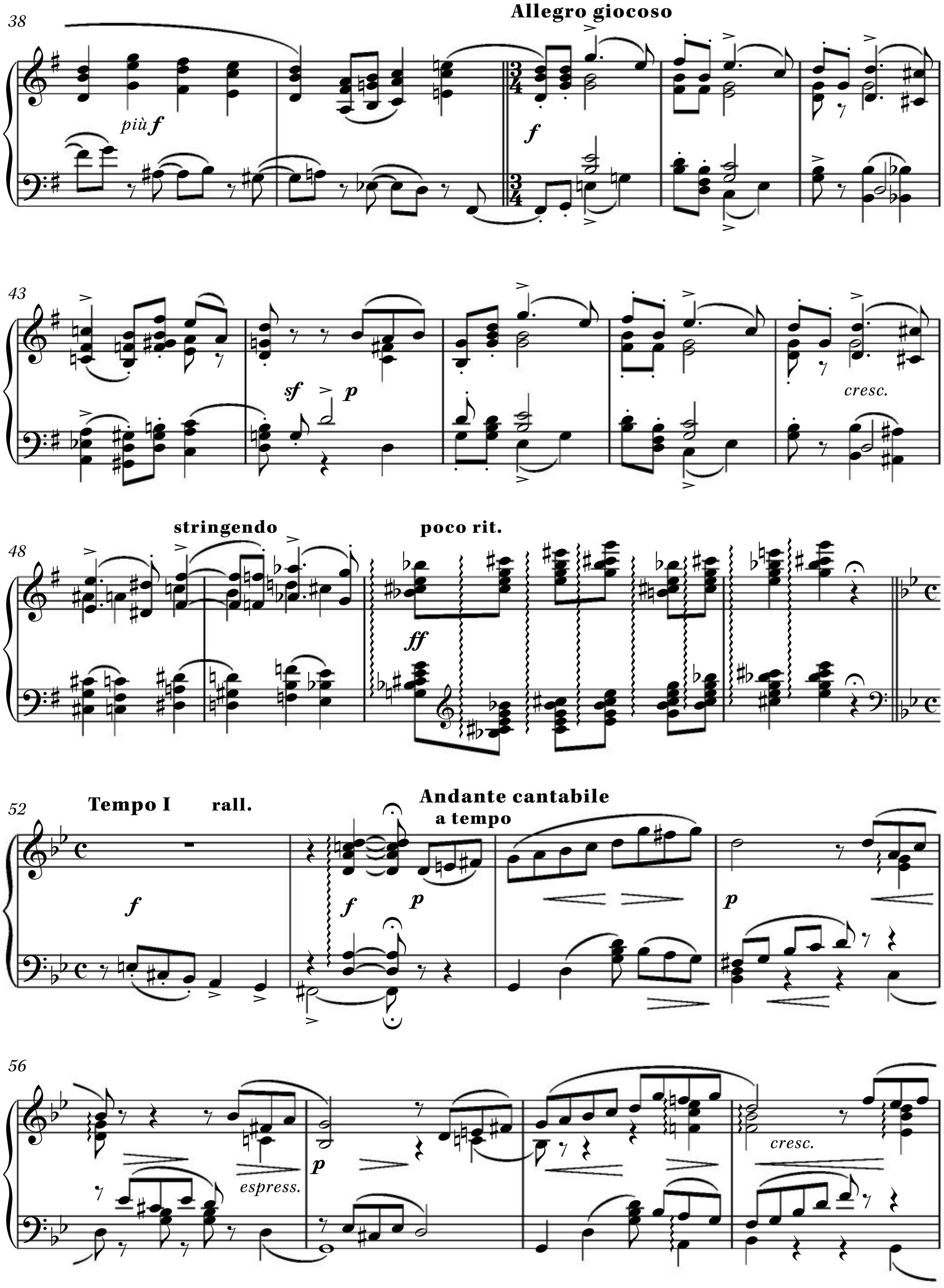
38
Allegro giocoso
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43
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48
stringendo
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Tempo I
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Andante cantabile
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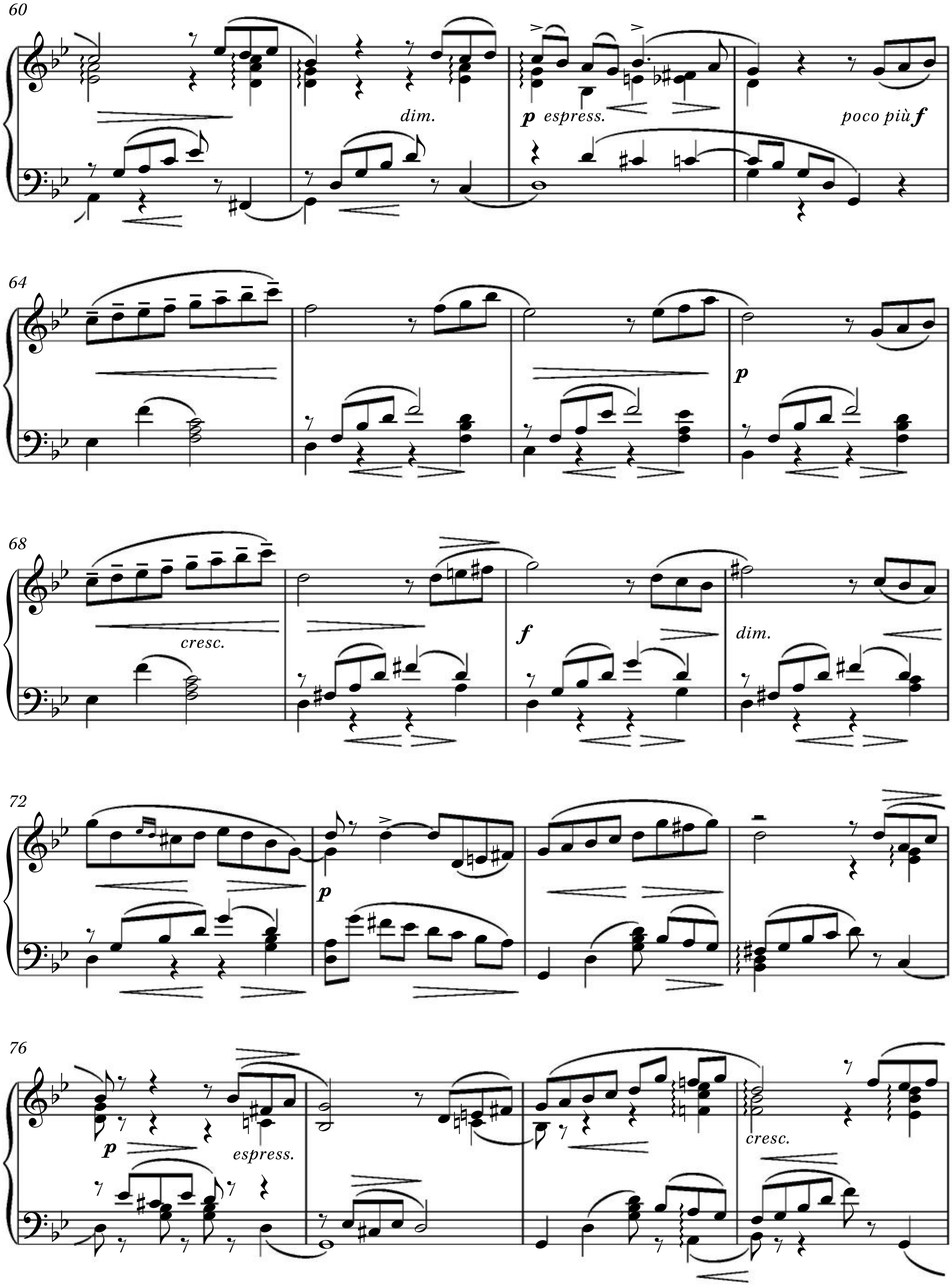
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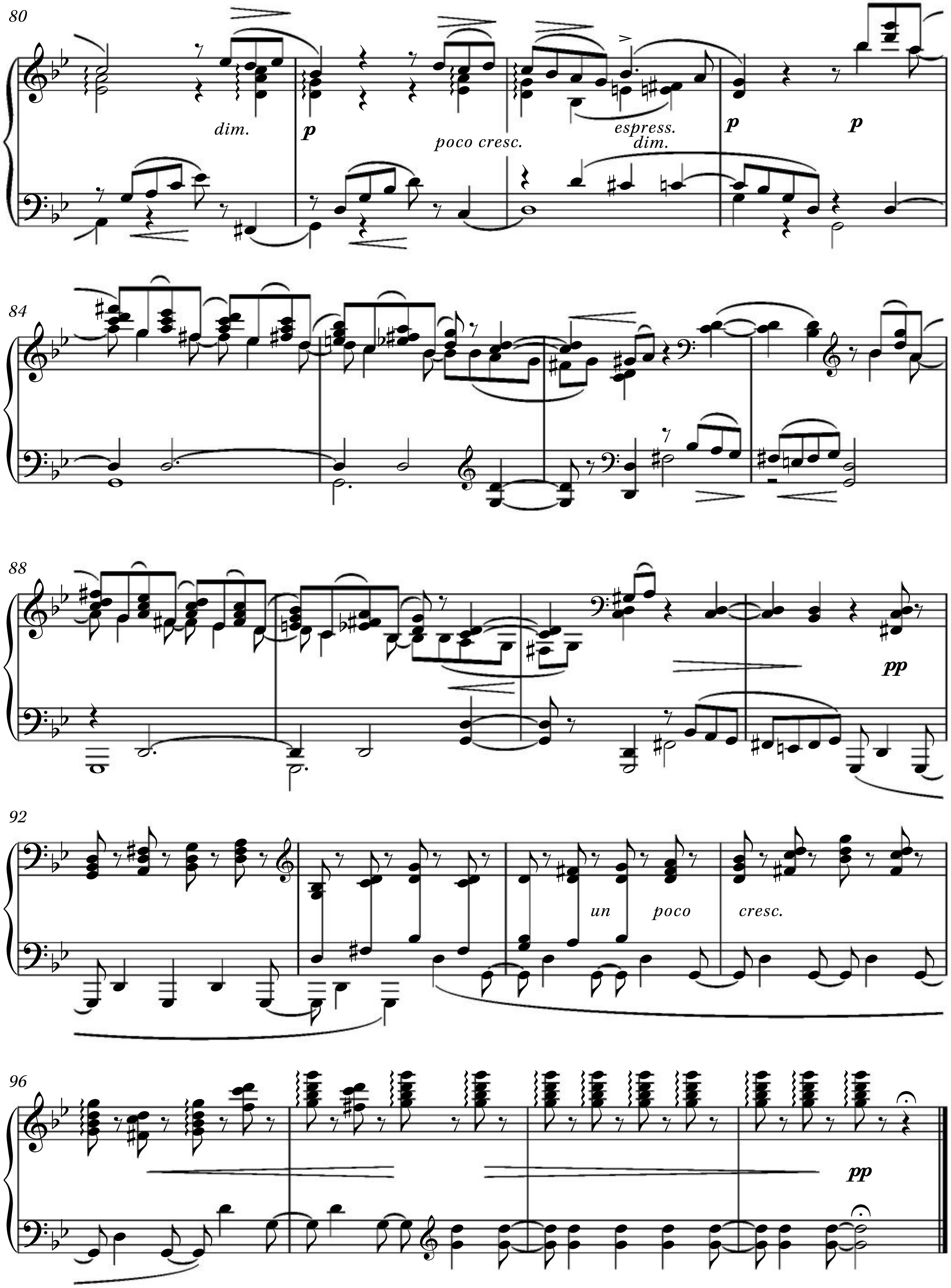
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un poco cresc.
96
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Elena Cobb Star Prize Festival 2023

Andrew Eales introduces a festival of young talent and the work of a tireless champion of music education

ANETA DLUGOLECKA

Elena Cobb's Star Prize Festival has been attracting young performers – including Laura Kesiak and Durand Dlugolecki (UK), above – to the Royal Albert Hall in London since 2018

In recent years the pianist, teacher, composer, entrepreneur and educator Elena Cobb has made a huge impact on young pianists. Her name, her superb piano publications and her extraordinary Star Prize Festival in the Elgar Room at London's Royal Albert Hall have all attracted considerable attention, with good reason.

The Elena Cobb Star Prize Festival is a unique event that offers performance opportunities for young pianists from across the UK and around the world. As the 2023 Festival nears, bringing together 75 young players from four continents, this is the perfect moment to take stock of how such a positive impact has been achieved.

The vision

Speaking to Cobb about the evolution of the event, and what we can expect from this year's Festival, I was struck by her passion, her heartfelt commitment and above all her generosity of spirit. Cobb is in the business of allowing young pianists the confidence and energy to fly, to express their enthusiasm and desire to communicate.

It is this positive vision that clearly underpins all she does, and when I first visited the Elena Cobb Star Prize Festival back in 2018, then in its infancy at the Royal Albert Hall, I was immediately impressed by the robust and expressive performances of the young players, all clearly enjoying playing the music of living composers, many of whom were themselves present to applaud and encourage.

Cobb tells me that the Festival was inspired by Robert Schumann's famous aphorisms for young musicians, and in particular his counsel to 'try to play easy pieces well; it is better than to play difficult ones in a mediocre style', and 'without enthusiasm you will never accomplish anything correctly in art'.

Players are invited to choose pieces that are approachable, not necessarily showing off the most technically difficult music they are capable of. Cobb explains to me that the event is not a competition. The 'prize' of the title is the opportunity of taking part, the joy of performing in one of the world's finest, most famous venues.

Having attended in 2018 and 2019, I can attest to the friendly atmosphere. Amid the undeniable diminuendo in the musical life of schools here in the UK and elsewhere, the Festival offers buoyant evidence of the feel-good power of wonderful music-making, and the impact it can still have in young people's lives.

As Cobb puts it, welcoming those taking part: 'Memories of your performance at the Elena Cobb Star Prize Festival on the world-famous stage will stay with you for ever. It will build your confidence, character and self-esteem, and one day, when you are older, you will be telling your own children: "When I was your age, I played the piano at the Royal Albert Hall".'

Piano teacher Juliana Reinat has brought children from Bogotá to perform at every one of these events so far. She says: 'Participating in the Elena Cobb Star Prize Festival for the fourth time holds immense significance for us. It offers a remarkable platform for talented pianists all over the globe to showcase their skills on an international stage, fostering cultural exchange and promoting the musical heritage of different countries. By engaging with diverse musical traditions and connecting with fellow pianists from around the world, our students have had the opportunity to broaden their artistic horizons and gain invaluable performance experience. Moreover, their presence at such an esteemed venue serves as a testament to the global appeal and universality of music, transcending geographical boundaries and unifying individuals through the power of music and expression.'

The history

How did such an event, with so incredible an international reach, come about under the leadership of a single visionary? Elena Cobb came to the UK from Latvia in 1996, and was immersed in delivering music education until 2016, since when she has devoted herself to developing the independent boutique publishing house EVC Music. Cobb's earliest publication, arriving in 2010, was of 10 jazzy pieces with a play-along CD featuring a live band. *Higgledy Piggledy Jazz* remains a popular favourite, and Cobb's music has gradually been joined by publications from top composers such as Nikki Iles, Heather Hammond, Philip Martin, Sam Wedgwood and many more.

From 2014 Cobb began working with music festivals to promote these new educational piano works. Links with colleagues and events around the world developed organically, collaborators including the British and International Federation of Festivals as well as independent festivals in Dulwich and Battersea and overseas in Austria, Germany, Colombia, the USA and Gibraltar. A fruitful ongoing partnership was formed with the Scherzo International Piano Competition (a member of the Alink-Argerich Foundation) in Israel, organised by Tania Kozlova and Stella Brenner.

With the support of this growing network, the Star Prize Festival itself launched at the Royal Albert Hall in 2018. In 2019 the event was shortlisted in the Outstanding Musical Initiative category at the Music & Drama Education Awards (formerly known as the Music Teacher Magazine Awards for Excellence). Notwithstanding a gap of two years due to the pandemic, the event has established itself in the annual calendar of the Elgar Room, featuring the venue's famous red piano formerly owned by Elton John.

The event

Ensuring as many can take part as possible, prospective performers are allowed to offer either one solo piece or a duet. The selection process begins in September and is carefully designed to identify those ready for such an experience, and who will be confident performing under the spotlight at such a high-profile occasion.

Following initial video auditions, Cobb suggests repertoire to suit the strengths of those chosen to take part. The programme is confirmed by January, giving players plenty of preparation time for the early summer event, at which point Cobb begins the arduous but necessary process of organising child performing licenses, completing safeguarding and other statutory checks.

To give some idea of the complexity, the 2023 event brings together children from as far afield as Australia, Canada, the USA, Colombia and the UK, and from Ukraine two refugee boys are supported on a full scholarship from the Festival.

ROYAL ALBERT HALL
ELENA COBB STAR PRIZE FESTIVAL

JULIANA REINAT

Students from the Juliana Reinat Piano Studio (Bogota, Colombia) line up in The Royal Albert Hall's Elgar Room, complete with its red grand piano

Each year, Cobb reimagines the event's content to keep it fresh and engaging. In previous years, she has organised masterclasses with the pianist Martin James Bartlett (UK) and the piano pedagogue Tania Kozlova (Israel), as well as performances by inspiring young virtuosos.

The Festival also highlights the music of one young composer each year: in 2019 Noeru Iwamoto from Japan, and in 2022 the UK's Alanna Crouch performed. This year Laura Kesiak from Chetham's School of Music will be playing her new piano piece *Echoes from Chopin's Land*. The Festival will also feature world premieres of some of the new works to be published later this year in a hotly anticipated new collection of music by women composers, *22 Nocturnes for Chopin*.

From 2022 a live house band accompanies the performers. The children receive audio recordings in advance, and then rehearse on the morning of the event. The band comprises irrepressible jazz educator Mark Armstrong (trumpet), Pete Long (tenor sax), Amy Baldwin (bass) and Rod Youngs (drums). Young players have very few opportunities to perform at the piano with a band, and this addition to the Festival sees Cobb revisit her idea of including a live band in a successful event she organised more than a decade ago with Susan Bloor at Foremarke Hall (Repton Preparatory School).

Closing thoughts

In times of significant challenge to the worlds of the performing arts and music education, Cobb has created an event that, perhaps unexpectedly, elevates sharing live performances of young piano players to a level many might have dismissed as impossible. And the Elena Cobb Star Prize Festival 2023 promises to be every bit as enjoyable and energising as the events of previous years.

This is a lively success story that inspires us all to embrace a more positive vision of what can be achieved when colleagues work together to deliver life-changing opportunities for young musicians. Long may it prosper! **IP**

The Elena Cobb Star Prize Festival takes place in the Elgar Room at the Royal Albert Hall in London on 19 June

Slavic fire and temperament: Byron Janis's recordings from the 1960s capture a rich talent

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

The song behind the music

Ateş Orga explores a new box-set of Byron Janis's recordings for Mercury Living Presence and recalls the career of this great American pianist

Born 95 years ago to a Polish-Russian Jewish family in steel-mill Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Byron Janis was iconic among America's Golden Age greats. A contemporary of Ivan Davis, Leon Fleisher, Gary Graffman, Grant Johannesen, William Kapell, Julius Katchen and Raymond Lewenthal – Jorge Bolet, Abbey Simon and Earl Wild were older, John Browning, Van Cliburn and André Watts younger – Janis embodied platinum pianism and all-out commitment, going on to have everything until in the early 1970s psoriatic arthritis started to take its toll. His spirit was heroic – 'through many surgeries and injections', one of his surgeons recalls, 'he never gave up [standing] as a symbol of hard work and fighting through adversity'.

Janis's teachers, from the age of four, included Abraham Litow ('a severe taskmaster', Moscow-trained, given to rapping errant hands with rulers), Josef and Rosina Lhevinne, Dorothea Anderson La Follette and Adele Marcus; additionally Roger Sessions for composition. Famously, Horowitz took him on as his first student (1945-48). Bypassing the competition circuit, Janis visited the USSR in autumn 1960, leading a path-breaking Cultural Accord between the superpowers, his opposite number, Richter, representing the Soviets – a fraught Cold War undertaking in the wake of the U-2/Gary Powers spying incident that spring. Attending his debut Moscow recital (7 October), Grigory Ginzburg, Tass reported, admired his 'unerring technique and perfect command of soft keyboard colours'. In 1966 he married the painter Maria Cooper, daughter of Gary Cooper and the New York Catholic socialite Veronica Balfe (the girl dropped by King Kong in the 1933 film).

For Janis the contrast between Marcus and Horowitz could not have been greater, nor, at his age ('a very young 16', Marcus observed, vulnerable and psychologically fragile), more personally confusing. Marcus, protective of others, was a didactic Classicist: she 'really laid the foundations of my musical technique and thought'. Horowitz, protective of himself, was a free-spirited Romantic, 'the eternal wanderer-artist', moulding his protégé to become a virtuoso, ready to project and exaggerate. 'The interesting thing was that he never, ever, played one note for me,' Janis recollected in 1990. 'But I constantly was hearing him play … I went on tour with him so that I shouldn't miss a lesson … I knew exactly how he phrased, how he felt about a piece … Not until later [breakdown imminent] did I realise I was becoming a copy of [him].'

Striding the Midwest/East Coast stage of America's history-shaping émigrés – Rachmaninov, Godowsky, Hofmann, Rubinstein, Horowitz, Arrau – bringing 'love' and bared 'passion' to the journey, Janis turned his Steinways and Baldwins into instruments of whispered trebles and roaring engines, diamond double-notes and God-given octaves. He was an artist of rhythmically curvaceous, bass-supported, full-chested melodies graced in all hues, underpinned by textures ranging from intimacy to brooding theatre, oceanic swell to volcanic thunder. Voicing, phrasing, lingering in the moment, telling stories, 'throwing' sound across a room was his signature. Chopin's exhortation to 'play with *all* your soul' was his guiding beacon. '*Then* something happens. Call it "inspiration", call it "catching the elusive now", call it whatever you like, but that's music … it transcends both piano and pianist.'

RCA – Rachmaninov's label – launched his discography, laid down largely by his early 30s (1947-59). Benefiting from progressive technology (three-microphone Schoeps M201 stereo enhanced from 1961 through the addition of 35-mm magnetic film) and the production/engineering chemistry of Wilma Cozart and Bob Fine, his Mercury Living Presence releases appeared between 1960 and 1964.

The 1962 Moscow partnership with Kondrashin and Rozhdestvensky was adrenalin-charged. The two Liszt concertos – proudly bannered as the 'first recordings ever made in the Soviet Union by American technicians and musical staff and equipment' (four-and-a-half tons of it) – witness Janis as perfectionist, a musician of fantasy, formal rigour, tensile energy and dynamic extremes, extolling Liszt's rhetoric, caressing his tenderness. You can tell a composer by his cadences, Ronald Stevenson used to say. Similarly a pianist. Janis prolongs and articulates with finesse, breathing notes and resolving harmonies with a thespian eloquence free of conceit. Kondrashin's weighted opening of the First Concerto (as for Richter the previous year in London) sets the scene dramatically, much as the following day Rozhdestvensky's rubatos and chamber emphases in the Second were to seduce. The same sessions yielded a dazzling Rachmaninov First (the narrative tracery of the finale's E flat major *Andante* even more spaced and haunting than the composer's Philadelphia 78s with Ormandy), and a Prokofiev Third of crystalline precision, limpid fingerwork and velvet toning, favouring breadth and high-wire nervosity before gratuitous speed or percussive aggression, Russian landscape and season resonating never far away in the orchestral timbre. Two minutes slower than Prokofiev's 1930 LSO account, Janis never wanted to hurry these pages: 27 minutes here, matching Gilels/Kondrashin's 1955 taping; 28 with Paray filmed in Paris in 1963.

For Rachmaninov's Second and Third, recorded in Minneapolis (1960) and Watford (1961), Janis had Dorati at the helm, a Hungarian grandee, Kodály/Bartók trained, whose Russian empathy and flair for the big tune was proverbially spectacular. The Third – feathered rather than fierce, opting for the shorter, lighter of the first movement's two cadenzas, aristocratically projected, the LSO keenly honed – sings and soars (finale cut, two bars after fig 52 to fig 54, notwithstanding), preferable to Janis's lesser tensioned 1955 Boston account with Munch.

Janis could be both volatile warrior and iridescent charmer, winningly apparent from his 1962 Minneapolis Schumann Concerto with Stanisław Skrowaczewski, a trap-ridden score he takes with the elegance of a thoroughbred steeplechaser. Debatably, the Minneapolis Rachmaninov Second is not quite so 18-carat, contrasting the C sharp minor and E flat major Preludes with which it was coupled initially. And the 1960 Wembley Tchaikovsky B flat minor Concerto, another of his warhorses, seems in places more routine than lustred – however tumultuous its climaxes and scything octaves, the virtuoso destiny of its glycerine runs. Does Menges perhaps bring too much reserve to the exercise, episodes framed without risk, the finale's cross-accents muted politely, at odds with Janis's Slavic fire and temperament? That May 1962 evening in Moscow – post-Tchaikovsky Competition, in the audience Ashkenazy, Gilels, Burgess and Maclean – when, to appease a 20-minute ovation following Rachmaninov's First, Schumann and Prokofiev's Third, Kondrashin got Janis to play the finale as an encore, unrehearsed, can surely only have been an occasion of searingly other electricity.

The June 1962 sessions – three high-octane days beginning at midnight, Janis tells us in his 2010 memoirs – witnessed additionally an encore album: a clutch of performances in a venue, the Bolshoi Hall of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, that Janis considered had 'just about the best sound for music anywhere'. Short pieces maybe, yet inspiringly jewelled, ebbing and flowing in speed and punctuation. Prokofiev's Toccata (less iron-foundry clamour than storm clouds across the tundra), Falla's *Miller's Dance*, the winsome, unhurried Texan rhythms of David Guion's *The Harmonica Player* beguile ear and senses. Liszt's *Petrarch Sonnet 104* and Sixth *Hungarian Rhapsody* (New York 1961) dream and evoke – the latter's caprice, stellar wizardry and 'awesome G-force curves' diversely nuanced, different from the courtship and earthy swagger of Janis's slower/quicker, Horowitz-inspired RCA coruscation, Korean War vintage (1952).

Mercury didn't reprise Janis's Strauss *Burleske* or Liszt *Totentanz*. Nor Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* which, culminating his 'physically, emotionally, politically draining' Kennedy-instigated 1962 tour, four months away from the Cuban missile crisis, he'd programmed with Benny Goodman in Leningrad's Winter Stadium (21 June). (Russians were no strangers to the piece, Tsfasman and Rozhdestvensky having recorded it for Melodiya two years previously.) He didn't record any Mozart (he'd done the A major K488 with Bernstein in 1960) or Beethoven (Chicago knew his C minor Concerto well). Nor Rachmaninov's *Paganini Rhapsody* (otherwise filmed in Paris with de Froment in 1968 – with telling body language). Given his affinity with Chopin, the absence of any dedicated album is surprising: the afterglow of his nocturnes, and the B minor Sonata's *Largo*, were always special, penetrating deeply, sufferingly.

We do though have a commanding remake of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, fusing transcendentalism, acquired tradition, own counsel and recasting. Plus, illicitly taped, the second of two Leningrad recitals from October 1960 (Melodiya having issued the first in 1986 [M10 47030, 47033].) Here is a chance to catch Janis at his peak, on the wing, imperious and poetic, centurion-toned. Listening to Chopin's Second Sonata, the Funeral March taken at a solemnly palled crotchet sub-50, is to time-travel the generations, the prayer and symbol of the hour palpable. There's a strikingly imagined Copland Sonata – journeying a marbled, redwood landscape stratified by elfin shadows and fevered angst, Rachmaninovian bells ringing throughout, a hope for peace. For openers, Mozart's little Mannheim Sonata K283 – classically sprung, joyously life-enhancing.

Decca's CD box-set, remastered by Thomas Fine from the original first-generation magnetic tapes and including a readable essay/interview by Jed Distler, is a handsome tribute. **IP**

Byron Janis The Mercury Masters
Decca 485 3607
9 CDs,
High-Fidelity Pure Audio Blu-ray Disc

MERCURY LIVING PRESENCE
BYRON JANIS
THE MERCURY MASTERS

Critic's choice

BY BRYCE MORRISON

Medtner
PIANO CLASSICS
Piano Sonatas Op.25 Nos. 1 & 2
Six Fairy Tales Op.51
DINA PARAKHINA

Medtner Piano Sonatas, Op 25 Nos 1 & 2 ('Night Wind'); Six Skazki, Op 51
Dina Parakhina *pf*
Piano Classics PCL10266

There is no lack of controversy regarding Medtner's music. Once denounced as 'a declaration of love in the language of the First Empire', it has also been described as the work of 'a Russian Brahms' in a misleading attempt to define his singularity. Such comments fly in the face of praise from figures such as Glazunov, Rachmaninov and Taneyev, and today Dina Parakhina joins past with present celebration, claiming 'in Medtner you find the whole complexity of life'. Such awe is reflected in performances that are faithful to both intimate and imperious demands.

In the Op 51 *Skazki* Parakhina reminds you that their English title (Piano Classics gives 'Fairy Tales', although 'Tales' is a more accurate translation) fails to capture an elfin or troll-like mood that can turn quickly from amiable to menacing, from playful to violent. How memorably she evokes the unsettled dream worlds of Nos 2 and 4, or the way No 3 in A major evolves from an endearing folk-tale idiom into hyperactivity before a return to its opening innocence. The *Skazki* may be miniatures but they brim with the possibility of large-scale gestures.

It is after leaving the multi-directional richness of the first of the two Op 25 Sonatas, though, that Parakhina achieves her finest and storming triumph. The *Night Wind* Sonata has been described as an 'epic masterpiece' and its immense physical and emotional demands are met by Parakhina with a resource so complete that it leaves her free to devote herself exclusively and without impediment to a dark and elemental vision prefaced by a poem by Tyutchev ('Night wind, night wind, why do you howl?'). Such grandeur and ambition have few parallels in the keyboard repertoire.

Even in Russia Medtner has suffered neglect, despite the composer's own magnificent recordings and superb if limited offerings by Moiseiwitsch, Gilels and Horowitz. Later, essentially pioneering albums by Hamish Milne, Geoffrey Tozer and Marc-André

Can Çakmur

ALBUM OF THE MONTH

BIS
SCHUBERT+
SCHOENBERG
CAN ÇAKMUR piano

'Schubert + Schoenberg'
Schoenberg Drei Klavierstücke, Op 11
Schubert Piano Sonatas, D537 & D959
Can Çakmur *pf*
BIS BIS2650 (SACD)

From time to time a recording arrives that takes you by the ears, not for sensational reasons but for a quiet authority and recreative subtlety that makes the familiar hauntingly unfamiliar. With Can Çakmur you are returned to your first sense of wonder and revelation at discovering Schubert's genius.

Contrasting but relating the composer's first complete piano sonata, the Sonata in A minor, D537, with the late masterpiece in A major, D959, you are made aware of qualities light years beyond the understanding of Schubert's contemporaries. And thanks to the quality of Çakmur's playing, you marvel at Schubert's tireless experimentation and prophetic creativity, his unsettling changes of mood and direction. Ultimately you sense a darkness to Schubert's imagination that is elusive. How else do you explain the restlessly experimental nature of the A minor Sonata, its alternately gaunt and expressive nature? How, above all, do you explain the ominous build-up to the central violence of the A major Sonata's second-movement *Andantino*?

Stravinsky may have asked of Scriabin, 'Where does he come from? And who are his forebears?', but one might ask the reverse of Schubert: who are his musical descendants? Perhaps a partial and daring answer is provided by Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op 11, which takes Schubert's far-reaching audacity into a further and darker realm. Truly great recordings of Schubert's piano sonatas are rare (Schnabel, Kempff, Brendel and, more recently, Volodos come to mind), but I know of few to match Can Çakmur's supple and penetrating confirmation of Schubert's genius.

Hamelin are today complemented by a wider appreciation from several pianists. But if it remains difficult to think of Medtner as part of the core repertoire, his lack of immediate accessibility making him essentially a specialised taste, Dina Parakhina's performances burn with such conviction that she will surely make you think again. Clearly on home ground, she tells you that Medtner is among her dearest loves; put simply, the music is in her blood. Piano Classics' sound is outstanding, and there are excellent, full accompanying notes by Ateş Orga.

ISATA KANNEH-MASON
DECCA
CHILDHOOD TALES
MOZART • DOHNÁNYI • SCHUMANN • DEBUSSY

'Childhood Tales'
Debussy Children's Corner
Dohnányi Variations on a Nursery Song, Op 25
Mozart Variations on 'Ah, vous dirai-je Maman', K265
Schumann Kinderszenen, Op 15
Isata Kanneh-Mason *pf*
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra / Domingo Hindoyan
Decca 485 4180

Isata Kanneh-Mason, at 26 the eldest of a richly gifted musical family, turns far away from a previous recording that included Samuel Barber's ferociously demanding Sonata to 'Childhood Tales'. And if there are two moments of painful nostalgia for past innocence (Schumann's 'Child Falling Asleep' and Debussy's 'The Snow is Dancing'), there is an overall sense of happiness in reflection. In Dohnányi's once-popular *Variations on a Nursery Song*, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra revel in the introduction's mock-solemnity before being joined by the pianist in an apt appreciation of the music's wit and sparkle.

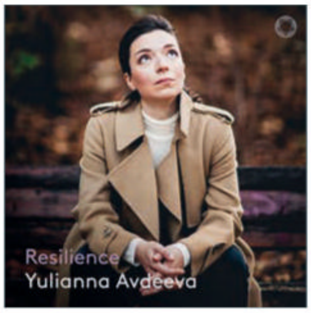
Kanneh-Mason's golliwog from Debussy's *Children's Corner* is suitably rumbustious, even slightly inebriated, and there is a nice sense of the composer's *Modérément animé* marking at the start of 'Dr Gradus ad Parnassum' as opposed to the hectic virtuoso pace of, say, Rachmaninov and William Kapell. In 'Jimbo's Lullaby' Chouchou's toy woollen elephant passes through nightmare to snoring contentment and in Schumann's *Kinderszenen* (together with Debussy's *Children's Corner*, the most vernal and touching of all tributes to childhood magic) Kanneh-Mason captures the chase of 'Blind Man's Buff' and is suitably valedictory in 'The Poet Speaks'. In Mozart's Variations on 'Ah, vous dirai-je Maman' there is a nimble appreciation of the composer at his lightest. Overall, an enjoyable programme of present accomplishment, though with the promise of greater imaginative scope to come.

naïve
ZLATA CHOCHIEVA
im freien

'Im Freien'
Works by Bartók, Draeseke, Liszt, Ravel, Schulz-Evler and Schumann
Zlata Chochieva *pf*
Naïve V7959 (2 CDs)

Zlata Chochieva's new album celebrates nature in performances of striking power and individuality backed by fearless technical resource. She challenges the simplicity of Schumann's *Waldszenen*, sounding oddly mannered in the opening 'Eintritt', yet even when you consider how, say, Richter and Pires achieve more with less elaborate means there is no doubting Chochieva's affection and engagement. In Ravel's *Miroirs* she makes a vivid transition from 'Oiseaux tristes' (for the composer, 'birds lost in the sombre torpor of a tropical forest') to the glittering marine-scape of 'Une barque sur l'océan'. Liszt's 'Feux follets' may be 'the most difficult piano piece ever written' (Jean Muller, the Luxembourg virtuoso) but Chochieva is as fanciful as she is masterly in its treacherous double-note will-o'-the-wisp flight. Again, her 'Chasse-neige' may be a formidable transcendental étude but it is also a sinister elemental evocation, an ultimate negation.

In a surprising departure from the great outdoors, Chochieva takes us into the ballroom for Schulz-Evler's take on Johann Strauss's *Blue Danube* (complete with an introduction once described as 'sending fabulous spangles of sound spinning through the air'), before ending with the eerie textures and harmonies of Bartók's 'The Night's Music'. These are all absorbing if provocative performances and they also include a rarity, Felix Draeseke's *Petite histoire* (a not-so-distant relation of Schumann's *Waldszenen*); cut down into encores, its three-piece suite would keep an audience guessing.

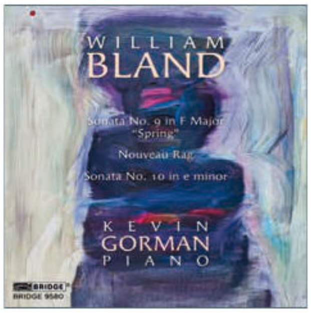


'Resilience'
Works by Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Szpilman and Weinberg
Yulianna Avdeeva *pf*
Pentatone PT5187 073

Now 37, the Russian pianist Yulianna Avdeeva first came to fame when she won the 2010 International Chopin Competition in Warsaw. In this programme entitled 'Resilience' she takes you far away from Romantic riches (though with Szpilman's *Mazurek* a hallucinatory memory) into music by composers who somehow fought their way into the light under tragic circumstances. This is notably true of Shostakovich's First Sonata, where a defiant corkscrew virtuosity flies in the face of the Soviet authorities' demand for mediocrity; a defiance for which the composer paid a heavy price. Władisław Szpilman (famously saved from death by a Nazi officer after listening to his Chopin) provides a powerful introduction to this recital, and Weinberg's Sonata No 4, Op 56, while clearly influenced by his teacher Shostakovich, once more evokes a background involving a grim and ever-present reality.

Finally, and on more familiar territory, there is Prokofiev's Eighth Sonata, the last of the three 'War' Sonatas and first performed by Emil Gilels. Yet even he would surely have been lost in wonder at Avdeeva's unfaltering authority and command. All in all, here is a pianistic plea for the moral power of music, the entire recital superbly accomplished – a singular triumph over a daunting task. **IP**

SOLO REPERTOIRE



William Bland Piano Sonatas, Volume 2
Sonata No 9 in F major, 'Spring';
Nouveau Rag;
Sonata No 10 in E minor
Kevin Gorman *pf*
Bridge BRIDGE9580

Volume 2 in Bridge's survey of William Bland's piano sonatas features the first recording of Nos 9 and 10, as well as the composer's popular *Nouveau Rag*. These demanding works are compellingly and excitingly performed by Kevin Gorman. Bland was born in 1947 and studied at Peabody Conservatory, Baltimore, with Ernst Krenek, Earle Brown and Richard Rodney Bennett – a diverse range of teachers. He has worked as a church organist, in musical theatre, and as a university composition teacher. Between 1998 and 2014 he created a series of 24 piano sonatas, encompassing each major and minor key. Each characterful work runs for around 20-30 minutes.

Bland is an eclectic, tonally conservative composer, who treats the sonata as an expansive, accommodating form. Thematic material is carefully organised, and there is an abundance of melody. His music has been described, with some justification, as modernist Liszt. But the range of influences is broader – maybe, in the case of No 9, too broad. Its first movement recalls Rachmaninov, Gershwin and Richard Addinsell (the *Warsaw Concerto*), while the second movement is jazzy and bluesy. Sonata No 10 is more rigorous, with no hint of kitsch, yet equally memorable – a superb composition. *Nouveau Rag* is a delightful tribute to the ragtime idiom. This is richly enjoyable music that challenges the listener only if they're troubled by Adorno's requirement that music should reflect its own time. Let a hundred flowers bloom, I'd argue.

ANDY HAMILTON

Bortkiewicz 'A Letter'
Zhenni Li-Cohen *pf*
Steinway & Sons STNS30129

Sergei Bortkiewicz (1877-1952) was an Austrian composer and pianist who was born in Ukraine and trained at the St Petersburg Conservatory and later with Liszt's former student Alfred Reisenauer. He lived at various times in Turkey, Berlin and Vienna and had a difficult life during and after the Russian Revolution and both world wars. Through it all he managed to compose an opera, two symphonies, three piano concertos, two piano sonatas, some songs and numerous short piano pieces. Like Rachmaninov, he comes out of the post-Romantic Russian tradition.

Somehow, Bortkiewicz remained untouched by the styles of such contemporaries as Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Instead, as we hear in the 13 brief pieces on this album (the longest is just under seven minutes), his style is extremely derivative, mainly from Chopin, Liszt and early Scriabin. Although the pieces span more than 35 years, from 1906 to 1942, there is little variety or sense of stylistic development. A strong, individual voice is missing, and too much of the music is slow and lyrical, with formulaic sequences and predictable phrases. Old-world sweetness, lush harmonies and moods of longing prevail. To hear so many such pieces in a row is a bit like having a dinner of desserts only. The standout pieces are the Nocturne 'Diana' from Op 24 and the titular work of the album, 'Ein Brief' from Op 35. The young pianist Zhenni Li-Cohen, trained at Juilliard, Yale and McGill, plays with strong musical commitment and a fine control of nuance, rising to meet the few passionate moments with aplomb. She is clearly a gifted musician and I look forward to hearing more from her. The recorded sound of her Steinway D is appropriately mellow.

CHARLES TIMBRELL

Medtner 'The Muse'
Forgotten Melodies, Book 1, Op 38; Four Lyrical Fragments, Op 23; Six Skazki, Op 51
Vittorio Forte *pf*
Odradek ODRCD430

Vittorio Forte, known for an eclectic repertoire from CPE Bach to Earl Wild, has only recently come to Medtner. But this collection reveals a deep connection to the composer, as well as with the technical facility necessary to navigate the intricate textures and rhythms. Whether in the joyous surges of the 'Danza Festiva', Op 38 No 3, the innocence that opens the third of the Op 51 *Skazki* or the ambiguous emotions of the waltz in the Op 23 set, the performances are palpably committed – and, on occasion (say, Op 51 No 6), even dazzling.

Unfortunately, there's not always enough variety in his articulation and dynamics; when you add in the boomy sound, it's no surprise that the music's profile is sometimes flattened. While Forte's booklet notes emphasise the importance of 'reminiscence' in Medtner's art, he sometimes short-changes precisely its evocative flavour. When the poignant opening theme of the 'Sonata reminiscenza' – the first of the *Forgotten Melodies* – recurs during the cycle, Forte highlights its formal function but doesn't draw out its emotional resonance. Still, even if this collection isn't on the level of Medtner from Hamelin, Tozer or Cahill Smith (to pick just a few), it's well worth sampling.

PETER J RABINOWITZ

'Piers Lane goes to town again'
Piers Lane *pf*
Hyperion CDA68163

Piers Lane celebrates a wide-ranging repertoire

BENJAMIN EALOVEGA

Has Piers Lane ever met any repertoire that he doesn't like, or doesn't play wonderfully well? Evidently not, judging from the majority of his Hyperion releases, and, in particular, this eclectic smorgasbord. This album consists mostly of short pieces or suites containing short movements; it is intelligently programmed in its running order, yet each selection works equally well as a stand-alone encore.

If you, like me, can't get enough of Edwin Fischer's Handel, Samuil Feinberg's Bach or Marcelle Meyer's Rameau, you similarly will drool over Lane's imaginatively nuanced Loeillet Suite in E minor. The first two Mazurkas from Szymanowski's Op 50 follow, where the pianist's grounded rhythm and impeccably spaced rubatos augur well for a complete Szymanowski Mazurka cycle from this pianist. A selection of Schubert Dances curated by Myra Hess finds Lane channelling the great lady's buoyant phrasing and sense of joy. Lane's wide dynamic contrasts and gorgeous pedalling make the best case for TK Murray's neo-Bartókian *Danse barbaro*. And Robert Constable's *A slinky foxtrot 'Nocturne'* is exactly what the title indicates.

Liszt's Tarantella marks the recital's halfway point in a performance where long-lined lyricism dominates, in contrast to the febrile cool one hears from Marc-André Hamelin or Sergio Fiorentino. Mark Saya's operatic paraphrase *Habaneras* humorously interweaves familiar and disperate habaneras into a musical crazy quilt. By contrast, Alan Charlton's *Fantasie-Mazurka* is serious and substantial, and makes me want to sample more of this tragically short-lived composer's work. If one must have Godowsky's rather overloaded *Rosamunde* ballet music transcription, then Lane's is the way to play it. He serves up numbers by Billy Mayerl and George Botsford as idiomatically as you'd expect, while the dignified understatement of Julian Jacobson's Bach Sarabande transcription brings this well-engineered programme to a close. Lane's informative and chatty booklet notes are as entertaining and articulate as his keyboard prowess. In short, 82 minutes of piano heaven, not to be missed!

JED DISTLER

'Kathleen Long: The Decca solo recordings 1941-1945'
Includes works by Respighi, D Scarlatti, Paradies, Bach, Schubert, Grieg, Fauré and Debussy
Kathleen Long *pf*
APR APR6041 (2 CDs)

APR's two-disc Kathleen Long album is a remembrance and a reminder. Personally, I recall recitals heard long ago and now lovingly recalled when, as a schoolboy, I was struck even then by an artist who played with a natural grace and fluency that, at its finest, was subtly engaging rather than evasive. Her comment 'I have no ambition' strikes a foreign note in our more hectic and fast-moving age. Again, I remember her homely appearance when she entered and left the stage accompanied by her handbag, and her charming admonition to her audience regarding her encore: 'You are quite right, it was *Listen with Mother*, but it was also the Berceuse from the *Dolly* Suite by Gabriel Fauré. Thank you so much.' Another time, another place.

Long's way with eight neglected but piquant Scarlatti sonatas is a special delight. Here, everything is characterised but nothing is overstated, her transparency the reverse of, say, Federico Colli's recent Scarlatti recordings (Chandos). While Colli is dazzlingly assertive and provocative, Long's phrasing is as natural as breathing, yet with every note beguilingly alive. Again, in Fauré (a speciality), just when you begin to think you have detected an understatement bordering on diffidence, your critical weathervane swings the other way, and whether in the early ornate and amorous world of the Second Barcarolle, in Variation 9 from the Theme and Variations (for Cortot 'a dark, lifted ecstasy, where on the high G sharp, the curve of the melody, the heart sinks down like a star in the evening'), or in the same work's closing benediction, she always, without show or emphasis, strikes at the heart of the matter. Small wonder that she provoked the hostility of Marguerite Long, her namesake in France, a pianist of fierce ambition who considered Fauré her exclusive property.

Then there is Long's Grieg, heard in a selection of eight of the *Lyric Pieces*, where her playing again exudes nimbleness and sensitivity. And while nobody can match Eileen Joyce's dexterity and fluttering enchantment in 'Butterfly', she is memorable in the lazy heat of 'Summer's Eve' and in her fleet-footed, or perhaps I should say fleet-fingered, 'Puck.'

Disappointments (if they can be called that) come in Schubert and, more surprisingly, Debussy. Compared to Paul Lewis's Schubert, to take a benchmark modern example, her rapidity and relaxation erase too much underlying drama and anxiety, almost as if anything more pointed would be ill-mannered, a very un-English display of poor taste. Similarly, much of her Debussy (Book 2 of the *Préludes*) makes you long for greater involvement. Can you smell the heather in

'Bruyères'? Are General Lavine's caperings sufficiently inebriated? And where is Debussy's naughtiness in his take on English custom and formality in 'Hommage à S Pickwick Esq'?

And yet to criticise such things is to ask a pianist to play outside her natural inclination. Confronted by a shy and admiring schoolboy, and discovering that I was pupil of Ronald Smith (fearless champion of Alkan), she asked me, not without a touch of irony, 'and are you immersed in technique, in glittering trills and arpeggios?' Few pianists have been truer to their own lights. APR's presentation includes several excellent photographs and the accompanying essay, while critically naive, is a mine of information.

BRYCE MORRISON

PIANO CONCERTOS

ONDINE
GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ

Bacewicz Piano Concerto;
Concerto for Two Pianos, etc
Peter Jablonski, Elisabeth Brauss *pfs*
Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra /
Nicholas Collon
Ondine ODE1427-2

The music of Grażyna Bacewicz (1909-69) was gaining prominence well before the current advent of interest in female composers and, as this latest release confirms, has an all-round conviction to its musical substance that needs no special pleading or tokenistic advocacy.

Equally accomplished as pianist and violinist, Bacewicz left only one concerto for the former instrument, which occupies a crucial place in her output, securing second prize (no first prize being awarded) at the Chopin Composition Competition in 1949 and demonstrating the neoclassicism of her early maturity at its most combative. Peter Jablonski makes the most of the vigorous interplay in an opening *Allegro* productively redolent of Bartók or Hindemith, then brings a plangency to the *Andante* with its variations on a folk song. Closer to Szymanowski in its bracing interplay, the final *Allegro* is driven home here with all the necessary panache.

The Concerto for Two Pianos (1966) finds Bacewicz confronting the challenge of post-war modernism head-on, yet without detriment to her music's formal clarity or expressive focus. Eschewing themes as such, each movement unfolds as the intensification of a specific aspect – rhythm in the forceful opening movement, harmony in the moodily atmospheric *Larghetto* then texture in a final *Vivace* whose decisiveness feels not a little sardonic. Elisabeth Brauss audibly relishes her contribution to a work that deserves its place in a still-limited repertoire.

Written midway between these pieces, *Music for Strings, Trumpets and Percussion* (1958) is at its most impressive in a central *Adagio* whose pointillist finesse is never merely colouristic. The programme opens with an Overture (1943) that was Bacewicz's first published work for orchestra, its melodic astringency and structural concision anticipating what was to come.

There is no competition for the two-piano work while, in the Piano Concerto, Julia Kociuban (Dux, with the First Concerto of Alexandre Tansman) is an engaging exponent, but orchestral playing is no match for the Finnish Radio SO, directed by Nicholas Collon with a real sense of Bacewicz's evolving idiom. Vivid if slightly airless sound; Anastasia Belina's note includes thoughtful reminiscences from Jerzy Maksymiuk on the premiere of the Two-Piano Concerto.

RICHARD WHITEHOUSE

THE COMPLETE
BEETHOVEN
PIANO CONCERTOS
GARRICK OHLSSON
PIANO
GRAND
TETON
MUSIC
FESTIVAL
ORCHESTRA
SIR DONALD RUNNICLES
CONDUCTOR

Beethoven Piano Concertos Nos 1-5
Garrick Ohlsson *pf*
Grand Teton Music Festival Orchestra /
Sir Donald Runnicles
Reference Recordings FR751 (3 SACDs)

Dating from Napoleon's 1809 siege of Vienna, 'nothing but drums, cannons, men, misery of all sorts' surrounding him, Beethoven's *Emperor* was the first-ever concerto to be recorded complete – in London in April 1922 by Liszt's Scottish disciple Frederic Lamond with the Royal Albert Hall Orchestra under Eugene Goossens. Ruggedly robust. Schnabel's pre-war Abbey Road HMV set with Sargent appeared between 1932 and 1935.

Garrick Ohlsson's view of the canon reaffirms his authority as a discerning Beethovenian with noble things to impart. He's lived with these icons most of his life, having so far, he says, chalked up in excess of a hundred performances of each. In the booklet accompanying this set, Donald Runnicles comments that Ohlsson 'gives us permission to allow the music to unfold, to relish the unexpected turn of phrase or spontaneous nuance in phrasing … ever sensitive to the intimate relationship between piano and orchestra, the dialogue, the "conversation" … [Beethoven's slow movements] are arias, sung and spun with all the beauty and flexibility of the finest singing voice in the finest song … The gentle giant in whose Herculean hands we are taken to Olympian heights.'

You won't find here histrionic speeds, light-fingered dispatch or melodrama. No effusiveness. No HIP rolled chord to launch the Fourth. The freshness of these performances, from the 2022 Grand Teton Music Festival in Wyoming, lies in their open-faced honesty. Gleamingly, they promise us the certainty that no note or angle will be misplaced, that the adventure of what Beethoven penned – rhythm, articulation, dynamics, texture – is what we'll get. The inviolability of the composer matters, not personal ego. If such things as Runnicles's pacing of the expositions of the First and Third Concertos (more *allegro* than *con brio*), or his prioritising of the fiddle counterpoint at bars 49ff of the Fifth's, remind us of Colin Davis and Arrau in Dresden, mid-1980s, we shouldn't be surprised. Arrau, grand-pupil of Liszt, stickler for the text, was influential in Ohlsson's development. It is understandable that his magisterial Beethoven might occasionally wander the landscape.

Impeccable clarity and architecture, enveloping *gran espressione* (the Second's *Adagio*), palatial tonal depth, sculpted sonority and thespian sovereignty are hallmarks of the music-making. The first-movement cadenzas – Beethoven's own, the more radical and massive of the two completions written subsequently for the First, the customary long one in the Fourth – are magnificently sustained, opulent in *Hammerklavier*-like character and prophetic fantasy. Runnicles, as you'd expect, excels, on the one hand precision concerto partner, on the other powerful symphonist. Along the lines of the Lucerne or Estonian initiatives, the hand-picked Grand

Teton Music Festival Orchestra set first-class standards (strings 12.10.8.6.5, antiphonal violins). Ohlssohn plays a New York Steinway; the recording is classically purist (Vic Muenzer/Kevin Harbison, four-mic Decca Tree, judicious spots) and invitingly ambient. Quality post-production, applause removed. A rejuvenating investment.

ATEŞ ORGA

BEETHOVEN
Piano Concertos 3&4
Elisabeth Leonskaja
Orchestre national du Capitole de Toulouse
Tugan Sokhiev

Beethoven Piano Concertos Nos 3 and 4
Elisabeth Leonskaja *pf*
Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse / Tugan Sokhiev
Warner Classics 5419 72630-9

Elisabeth Leonskaja's discography may be fairly aristocratic but Beethoven doesn't figure prominently – certainly, not to the extent that he did in the recorded legacy of her mentor Sviatoslav Richter. Still, her concerto debut, at the age of 11, was in Beethoven's First Concerto, and these scrupulous recordings of the Third and Fourth seem nurtured by a lifetime of experience. Patient, steadfast and largely self-effacing, they're dedicated readings that radiate the pianist's reverence, readings that seem imbued with the principle that Beethoven offers a sacred experience.

Yet it's an illusion. Compare Leonskaja to Artur Schnabel, often considered the archetype of that aesthetic, and you'll see what's missing here. With Schnabel, every modulation brings a change in vista; with Leonskaja, the scenery, printed in grey-scale, stands still (even the harmonic wanderings in the Fourth's first-movement development pass without notice). With Schnabel, each phrase has a resilience that leads somewhere; with Leonskaja, the music is abstractly shaped with little emotional or rhetorical pay-off. Schnabel's Beethoven offers constant adventure; Leonskaja's keeps the composer firmly disciplined (not even the coda of the Third's finale breaks loose).

Is Leonskaja proficient? Definitely. Does she give a clear sense of the shape and inner workings of the scores? No doubt. But Beethoven needs more than a reliable tour guide – and while these interpretations point out familiar points of interest, they don't seem concerned with uncovering anything new. Sokhiev follows dutifully, and the engineering is unexceptionable; but the Toulouse orchestra are timbrally neutral (when the winds aren't sour), and their rhythms sag.

PETER J RABINOWITZ

Rachmaninoff
PIANO CONCERTO NO.3
YOUTH SYMPHONY
Silvestrov
THE MESSENGER
ANNA FEDOROVA
SINFONIEORCHESTER ST. GALLEN
MODESTAS PITRENAS
CHANNEL

Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 3; 'Youth' Symphony **Silvestrov** The Messenger
Anna Fedorova *pf*
Sinfonieorchester St Gallen / Modestas Pitrėnas
Channel Classics CCS45023

With this album Anna Fedorova – whose mentors include Alfred Brendel, the late Menahem Pressler, Steven Isserlis and András Schiff – completes her Rachmaninov concerto cycle. And although her warmth and sincerity are never in question, her tendency to admire the scenery (so to speak) for just a little too long leads to a loss of line and impetus. She has ample strength (Rachmaninov once said that he wrote the Third Concerto for elephants) and presents a solid if arguably earthbound alternative to, say, Argerich's legendary flame-throwing temperament. Fedorova chooses the weightier of the two cadenzas (in keeping with her overall breadth) and the final pages are a magisterial confirmation of her vision and intention.

And yet with over 50 recordings of this outrageously demanding concerto in the catalogue, it is difficult, for all its quality, to place this performance in the same light as legendary, more spine-tingling recordings by Horowitz, Gilels, Argerich and Cliburn (his live performances from the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition). Rachmaninov's single-movement 'Youth' Symphony, an apprentice work, is included, and Valentin Silvestrov's *The Messenger* (a distant relation of Mompou's *Música callada*) provides a calming meditation 'connecting our world with heaven'.

BRYCE MORRISON

CHIYAN WONG
SWING!
CHRISTOPH KONCZ
LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
TSFASMAN
RAVEL

Ravel Piano Concerto in G
Tsfasman Suite for Piano and Orchestra
Chiyan Wong *pf*
London Symphony Orchestra / Christoph Koncz
Platoon PLAT18171

This is my first acquaintance with pianist Chiyan Wong, who was born in Hong Kong and trained mainly in London. His first recording, devoted to operatic fantasies by Liszt, won a Grand Prix du Disque from the Franz Liszt Society and his later album of works by Bach and Busoni has also been highly praised. On this recording he displays stylistic versatility and imagination as well as a brilliant technique. Balances in the Ravel tend to slightly favour the orchestra, but the brass and wind soloists acquit themselves admirably throughout. The cadenza in the first movement could be a bit more contemplative and colouristic and the opening solo in the slow movement could be steadier and without the frequent displacements between the hands. There are lovely moments later in the movement, and the finale is a success in every way, fast, brilliant, jazzy and precise.

According to the booklet notes, Alexander Tsfasman (1906-71) was a Ukrainian-born Jewish composer and pianist who became the Soviet Union's first professional jazz musician. But he was classically trained at the Moscow Conservatory, studying under Felix Blumenfeld, a teacher of Horowitz. His four-movement Suite, composed in 1945, begins with 'Snowflakes', full of dazzling Lisztian virtuosity and suggestions of Gershwin. 'Lyrical Waltz' is sentimental, with swelling strings and light piano filigree. 'Polka' is suitably rhythmic and the jazzy 'Career' reminds me very much of Zez Confrey's *Dizzy Fingers*. The work is an admirable showcase for Wong's forthright virtuosity and conductor Koncz's precise leadership.

CHARLES TIMBRELL

Live Reviews

Beatrice Rana played Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata with drama and profound lyricism

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EVA VERMANDEL

BOSTON

Jordan Hall
Beatrice Rana 14 April
Symphony Hall
Evgeny Kissin 23 April

Most pianists choose to wait until they reach artistic maturity before tackling Beethoven's gigantic *Hammerklavier* Sonata. It's the longest sonata – about 45 minutes in duration – in the standard repertory, with a 20-minute slow movement that's almost impossible to sustain and even harder to understand. **Beatrice Rana**, who first came to attention after winning the Silver Medal in the 2013 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, is only 30. But her recent performance of this work in Boston's Celebrity Series was among the finest this listener has heard. She played the hugely difficult opening movement at a heroically fast tempo. She served up sheer energy with intensity, polyphonic ingenuity and superb marksmanship. She expressed the shifts in tone, the ideas and the movement's long-lined melodies with the force of colliding tectonic plates. Her playing of the brief second-movement Scherzo was equally illuminating. Most pianists make this movement sound like a continuation of the first. But Rana drew our attention to the difference between the two. She reminded listeners that 'scherzo' has its root meaning in the Italian for a light, humorous jest, making it impossible not to notice that the Scherzo's opening theme parodies the main theme of the first movement. She captured the composer's ironic tone, making an ideal transition to the *Adagio sostenuto*.

The beginning of the movement is marked *Appassionato e con molto sentimento* ('Passionately and with great feeling') and it was in achieving these qualities and applying them to the entire movement that this young Italian demonstrated the full range of her artistry. The movement's sublime, prayerful, unbroken arc of lyricism is one of the greatest challenges in this most difficult of all sonatas. Rana was able to play the music as slowly and softly as possible without breaking the spell she cast. Other pianists – including Barenboim, Sokolov, Kissin and Afanassiev – may play it even more slowly but Rana was exceptional in bringing the marking *sostenuto* vividly to life in 20 minutes – many performances are shorter – without any breaks in the line. Beethoven's design calls for ecstasy, quasi-operatic lyricism and profound meditation, and Rana's navigation through the music's perilous requirements was both fearless and skilful.

The clarity, brilliance and lucidity of her playing in the fourth movement's gigantic fugue also stood out. But it was Rana's remarkable and judicious use of rubato in the slow movement that I'll remember most. She is regarded as a great Chopin player, and I can see why. It was her ability to achieve a perpetually singing line that made me regret a change in the programme. She was originally scheduled to perform Chopin's Second Sonata in the first half. Her playing on this special evening suggested fascinating possibilities in that work. Instead, the Boston audience heard Bach's *French Suite* No 2 in C minor and Debussy's suite *Pour le piano*. Her Bach was subtle and nuanced and her Debussy brilliant and exuberant. Her three encores were Godowsky's arrangement of Saint-Saëns's 'The Swan', Debussy's Étude 'Pour les huit doigts' and Scriabin's Prelude in B major, Op 11 No 11.

A week later, at Symphony Hall, **Evgeny Kissin** also appeared in Boston's Celebrity Series, and demonstrated a mastery of two great composers whose solo keyboard works he has largely eschewed: Bach and Mozart. Although Kissin probably began playing Bach shortly after he learnt to walk, until this season's performances of the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* he had never played his music publicly. Kissin had confined his excursions into Bach by way of the piano transcriptions by Ferruccio Busoni of works including the D minor Chaconne for solo violin and the C major *Toccata, Adagio and Fugue*.

Kissin's performances of Bach-Busoni are great, but his Boston performance of un-hyphenated Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* was even greater. His articulation of the polyphony in the concluding three-voice Fugue was remarkable in its cumulative effect, gradually generating excitement from its quiet, barely perceptible opening to the thrilling climax that filled the cavernous spaces of Symphony Hall with glorious sound. Even more remarkable was his navigation of the Fantasy's seemingly wilful and fanciful peregrinations, which give birth to the discipline of the Fugue.

While Kissin has been a persuasive interpreter of several of Mozart's late piano concertos and has collaborated with Martha Argerich in some of the composer's duets and the great Sonata in D major for two pianos, K448, his performance of the composer's D major Sonata, K311, in the 2022-23 season is only the third time a Mozart sonata has appeared on a Kissin programme in 35 years of playing in public. This performance made him sound like a seasoned Mozart interpreter. He delivered the outer movements with exhilarating energy and the central *Andante con espressione* was played with a sensitive touch and considerable feeling.

The last item before the interval was an extraordinary performance of Chopin's Polonaise in F sharp minor, Op 44, 12 minutes of some of the composer's darkest music. The pianist had originally scheduled Debussy's exotically coloured and joyous *Estampes,* but Russia's invasion of its neighbour Ukraine changed all that. Russian-born Kissin, who has refused to travel to and perform in his native country since Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 2000, has made his opinion of the president and his war abundantly clear. He describes 'a criminal war waged by a dictator who is also a mass murderer and that is why I decided to play the Polonaise instead of *Estampes*. I just felt that it was not the right time to enjoy the beauty and the sensual pleasures of the "Evening in Grenada".'

Evgeny Kissin brought searing intensity to music by Chopin and Rachmaninov

SHEILA ROCK

Chopin arrived in Paris in 1831 in the wake of Russia's brutal suppression of a revolt by Polish patriots who sought to liberate Poland from Russian occupation. Because he was known to be an ardent supporter of the rebellion, Chopin was never able to return to his country. But his anger towards and his resentment of Russia found its way into his music, nowhere more explicitly than in this F sharp minor Polonaise. Kissin's Boston performance of this work was better than any of its predecessors in previous seasons. Russian war crimes, so very like those they committed two centuries ago in Poland, seem to have galvanised the way he plays it. The menace with which Kissin opened the piece; the manner in which he expressed the almost inhumanely furious development; the heartbreak he brought to the reminiscence of Poland in the middle section's mazurka; and, finally, the way he emphasised the insidiousness of the return of the violent polonaise rhythms heard earlier – Kissin depicted all of this with searing intensity and unblinking focus.

The second half was devoted to Rachmaninov – 10 short pieces, including three encores. I used to think there were only three pianists worthy of comparison to Rachmaninov in his own music: Benno Moiseiwitsch, Vladimir Horowitz and Sviatoslav Richter. To that list one must now add Kissin. In the *Étude-tableau* in E flat minor, Op 39 No 5, he produced a torrent of passion expressed in a tsunami of sound, and in the D major *Étude-tableau*, Op 39 No 9, which concluded the advertised programme, he matched the magnificent clangour created by Horowitz and Richter. Kissin's final encore was the C sharp minor Prelude, Op 3 No 2, a piece the composer came to hate because audiences refused to leave until he performed it.

STEPHEN WIGLER

Live Reviews

Javier Perianes impressed in Granados's complete Goyescas

IGOR STUDIO

LONDON

Wigmore Hall
Marouan Benabdallah 11 April
Javier Perianes 23 April
Benjamin Grosvenor 7 May

It isn't often that a concert opens a window on a sound world and repertoire completely unknown to a London audience, but such was the case with 'Arabesque', a recital presented by the Moroccan-Hungarian pianist Marouan Benabdallah, who modestly declined to include a paragraph about his own pianistic achievements in his concert programme note. His intention here was to keep the spotlight on others.

His programme note began with a story. 'In September 2014,' he wrote, 'after several failed attempts to find Arab composers of classical music, I managed to use just the right keywords in my search. This stroke of luck enabled me to discover a musical treasure chest filled with countless gems of a repertoire completely unknown to me at the time.' Born in Morocco to a Moroccan father, he had been raised in the musical traditions of his Hungarian mother. 'What began as a short-term, three-to-four-year detour from the standard classical repertoire turned into a major focus in my life as a concert pianist,' he continued. 'Today the Arabesque Project counts more than 120 composers in a repertoire of solo, chamber and symphonic music.'

So here he was, armed with what he called a 'Menu dégustation' for the project: short pieces by seven 20th-century composers from the Maghreb, most of whom had trained in Europe but all of whom had kept faith with the indigenous music of their homeland. And there wasn't one dud among them: each had managed to create an East-West fusion that had both invigorating freshness and organic integrity.

As Benabdallah pointed out in a prefatory speech, the fact that a piano doesn't have quarter-tones presents a hurdle for any composer wanting to harness it to Arabic music, but his chosen seven found ways to circumvent that. Zad Moultaka did it by periodically plucking the strings, and Paul Ben-Haim by rapid staccato chords going like the wind; there was plenty of virtuosity. There were echoes of Chopin, Bartók, Mussorgsky and inevitably Debussy and Ravel (given those composers' Francophone training), but for the most part the sound worlds evoked were tangibly Arabic, and sometimes excitingly new. It would be nice if this recital were to become a recorded album.

In addition to being a virtuoso pianist, Benabdallah is also a witty entertainer. Taking his leave, he thanked us for buying tickets without having heard of any of the composers, or indeed of him. But this event was only a beginning: he will be back, and so, I hope, will we.

Meanwhile, here is an early warning for a recording from Javier Perianes, on Harmonia Mundi, of Granados's complete *Goyescas*. At Wigmore Hall, in an account deeply pondered and nobly conceived, he gave us a thrilling performance of this work, which is rarely performed complete. Being led through this maze in which meandering grace alternates with hurtling force was a pleasure; time and again Perianes would light a fuse then tantalisingly make us wait for the charge to ignite. My only reservation concerned his dynamics, which felt to me to lack a true *pianissimo*, although I know others sat further back in the hall who didn't share this perception.

Goyescas made up the second half of Perianes's recital: the first half was an intriguing collage of variations by Clara and Robert Schumann, and by Brahms. The link was Robert's wistfully valedictory little theme in F sharp minor, and we first encountered it in Clara's Op 20 Variations. Initially Perianes's interpretation felt overripe for the simplicity of this work, but, once the ears acclimatised, the charm of Clara's ideas came across vividly. Then it was Robert's turn with variations, *Andantino de Clara Wieck*, from his F minor Piano Sonata, using the same foundation on which to build a more diffident edifice. Brahms's *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, Op 9, reflected genius in its youthful prime, as the theme was turned upside down and inside out in a series of short treatments, entrancingly played.

Now 30 but still mischievously boyish-looking, Benjamin Grosvenor electrified the Wigmore audience with a recital of singular power, although like Perianes he eschewed the dramatic potential of *pianissimo*. He began with a mighty reading of Busoni's transcription of the Chaconne from Bach's D minor Partita for solo violin, a radical re-composition rather than a mere transcription in that the effects are treated from the standpoint of organ tone. The opening chords were iron-clad, and there was massive weight behind Grosvenor's touch even in the passagework; the driving rhythms, rich textures and high-arching stretches of melody were beautifully controlled, and the work's bold contours were made to hold together tossing seas of notes.

With its start-stop-start momentum, Schumann's C major *Fantasie*, Op 17, always sounds like an improvisation, and Grosvenor traded successfully on that quality, creating much to admire along the way as the composer's romantic fire repeatedly flared out. He infused the march with a playful delicacy and gave its trio an artless sweetness, but there is more poetry to be found in the hushed announcement of the finale's theme. This deficiency became much more apparent in the work that followed, Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin*. The semiquavers of the Prelude, which should have a pearly beauty, were scrunched into impatient fistfuls, and this set the tone for subsequent movements. It was only in the Menuet that Grosvenor found the

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intimacy and singing poetry of this delicately poised work.

But Grosvenor's finale was sensational: a performance of Prokofiev's demonic Piano Sonata No 7 that could hold its own beside the famous recording by Sviatoslav Richter, who premiered the work in 1943. Grosvenor ensured that the manic *Allegro inquieto* was furious enough, that the baritone melody of the *Andante caloroso* had a rueful tenderness and that the concluding *Precipitato* lived up to its promised drive and momentum – the latter was exemplary, a note-perfect blizzard of flying hands and furiously thundering octaves. Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* made an ideal encore, culminating in a series of exquisite musical and pianistic explosions.

MICHAEL CHURCH

AIX-EN-PROVENCE

Aix-en-Provence Easter Festival
Magnus Lindberg Piano Concerto No 3
Yuja Wang *pf*, Orchestre de Paris /
Klaus Mäkelä
15 April

Magnus Lindberg's Piano Concerto No 3 had a bumpy start in life. It was scheduled for its premiere in China before Covid delayed the first performance until October 2022. It eventually took place at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, with Yuja Wang and the San Francisco Symphony under Esa-Pekka Salonen. The performance at Aix-en-Provence in April followed the French premiere in Paris two days previously.

Written for Yuja Wang, Lindberg's Third Piano Concerto marks something of a departure for the composer, with piano-writing that shows a clear debt to the Romantic piano concerto tradition. There are two cadenzas in three movements (fast-slow-fast), with much ultra-rapid, filigree writing that plays clearly to the strengths of Yuja Wang's spectacular fingers. In parallel, Lindberg seems to expand his frame of reference compared to the scores of his first two concertos (No 1, 1994, dedicated to Paul Crossley, and No 2, 2011/12, premiered by Yefim Bronfman). In the Third Concerto Lindberg nods to Messiaen, Ravel, Scriabin, Liszt (particularly in the cadenzas) and, perhaps most surprisingly of all, Gershwin. Lindberg himself has acknowledged the third concertos of both Bartók and Rachmaninov as significant inspirations. Such pluralism is nevertheless underpinned by a core that remains true to Lindberg himself, roots of the tree from which such branches can spring.

Yuja Wang played with technical mastery, although a touch more depth to her sound would have created a fuller tonal spectrum.

Yuja Wang dazzles in Magnus Lindberg's demanding Third Piano Concerto

JULIA WESELY

There was no doubting the rapport between soloist and conductor, with Mäkelä in total control of the Orchestre de Paris.

While some of Lindberg's earlier works are markedly gestural, this concerto feels more through-composed. Structure is paramount, and the return to the opening prior to Wang's well-moulded first-movement cadenza is beautifully prepared. The end of the first movement is pure magic, leading to a slow movement where the music seems to fragment; a bell acts as something of a structural articulator. Here, the music turns on a sixpence and becomes suddenly capricious. Interestingly, Lindberg has described the piece as 'a concerto in three concertos', acknowledging the individuality of each of the work's panels. Jazz certainly informs the finale's opening. It was this movement that truly confirmed the strength of the connection between Wang and Mäkelä, tight corners beautifully negotiated. Wang's technique is of course universally admired, but most impressive was her grasp of the work's architecture. Together, Wang and Mäkelä provided an ideal mix of foreground detail and large-scale coherence, all cemented by the sound and sheer concentration of the Orchestre de Paris. The finale is marked by super-virtuoso writing and, in this performance, its demeanour was light and bright, the piano and orchestra again perfectly in step (Mäkelä's beat is remarkably clear).

Lindberg's three piano concertos occupy individual universes: the First has a transparency that occasionally glows; the Second, inspired by Ravel's Left-Hand Concerto, exudes a preternatural, glowering intensity, in its first movement especially. Of the three, the Third may receive the greatest long-term currency, in no small part because of Yuja Wang's advocacy. If this concerto had me pining for the tougher grit of, say, *Graffiti*, it does raise questions about the future of Lindberg's music. Is this a softening of aesthetic or a commission-specific response?

COLIN CLARKE

The 13 April concert from the Philharmonie de Paris is available to subscribers on medici.tv

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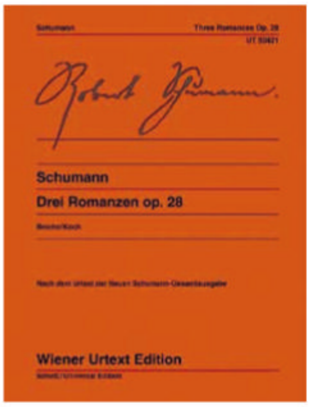
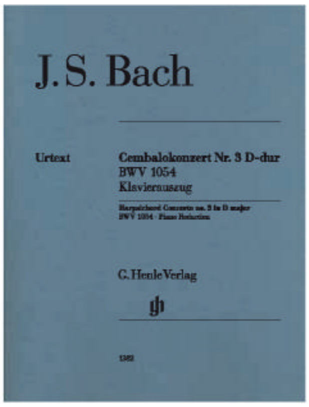


Schumann Drei Romanzen, Op 28
Wiener Urtext UT 50420

In 1843 Schumann reportedly identified *Kreisleriana*, the *Novelletten*, Op 21, the Op 12 *Fantasiestücke* and his Op 28 *Romanzen* as his finest piano works. The inclusion of Op 28 may seem strange to us today, for two of the three Romances (Nos 1 and 3) are rarely performed. In fact, these three pieces were completed as a Christmas present for the composer's beloved wife Clara and make a powerful and contrasting impression when performed as a set. Of course, it is the second *Romanze* in F sharp major that is by far the most famous piece in the group. There are many editions of this piece on the market available separately, but none, to the best of my knowledge, present the notes as clearly, elegantly and persuasively as this new Universal/Wiener Urtext edition. It makes effective use of a three-stave layout for most of the piece, and is typeset with a larger font than that used in both the Edition Peters ABRSM Grade 8 anthology and the fascinating Breitkopf & Härtel complete Schumann edition (edited originally by Clara herself).

Generosity of layout is also a welcome feature in the first *Romanze*, which in characterisation and spirit seems close to the *Novelletten*. The large-scale third *Romanze*, complete with two intermezzos, dotted rhythms and mercurial figurations, also emerges with admirable clarity and focus. Edited by Michael Beiche with fascinating background notes and useful fingerings from Tobias Koch, this is a publication that is most welcome. Exquisite though the F sharp central *Romanze* is, more performances of all three pieces played as a set are really desirable. Hopefully this beautifully presented edition will motivate performers to present the three Romances of Op 28 as a whole.

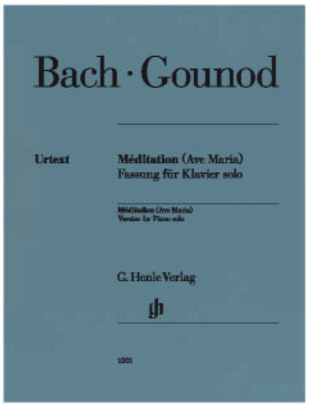
Schumann considered his Drei Romanzen among his finest works



JS Bach Harpsichord Concerto No 3, BWV1054
G Henle Verlag HN 1382

Though there are seven solo keyboard concertos by JS Bach listed in his catalogue of works, today we regularly hear in concert performances only those in D minor (BWV1052) and F minor (BWV1056) – often played by prodigious students at the early developmental stages in their careers. This is a great shame, for though a significant number of the set of harpsichord works BWV1052-1058 may not have originally been scored with a solo keyboard instrument in mind, the music is consistently fresh, memorable and surely convincing when performed with either piano or harpsichord by musicians of all ages.

BWV1054 is famous in its original version as the E major Violin Concerto. Here in its harpsichord guise it is transposed down a tone to D, resulting in a most affable, keyboard-centric work that is every bit as charming as the celebrated violin original. The solo part requires nimble coordinated fingerwork but should not be beyond the capabilities of Grade 8- or early diploma-level players who may otherwise be inclined to gravitate towards the F minor Concerto. This clear, lucid edition comes with useful background information and is most welcome for study and performance.



JS Bach/Gounod Méditation (Ave Maria)
G Henle Verlag HN 1301

Charles Gounod's celebrated elaboration of the first Prelude from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* was immediately popular in its first version: a violin-piano duo under the title *Méditation*. Indeed, such was its success that Gounod recast the transcription in numerous alternative arrangements, including one for the hefty forces of a six-part choir that is required to intone the canticle 'Benediction et Claritas' in ensemble with violin and piano!

The version for solo piano, originally published by Heugel in 1853, has been surprisingly neglected by pianists in recent years. Henle's new edition is edited by Gérard Condé and includes helpful fingerings. It will surely be welcomed by many as a charmingly accessible addition to the repertoire: though containing only moderate technical challenges in the first section, the repetition leads to a much richer elaborated reprise in which Bach's original material affords Gounod the opportunity to indulge most beguilingly. Those in search of a touchingly familiar yet unusual encore need look no further.

BY MURRAY McLACHLAN

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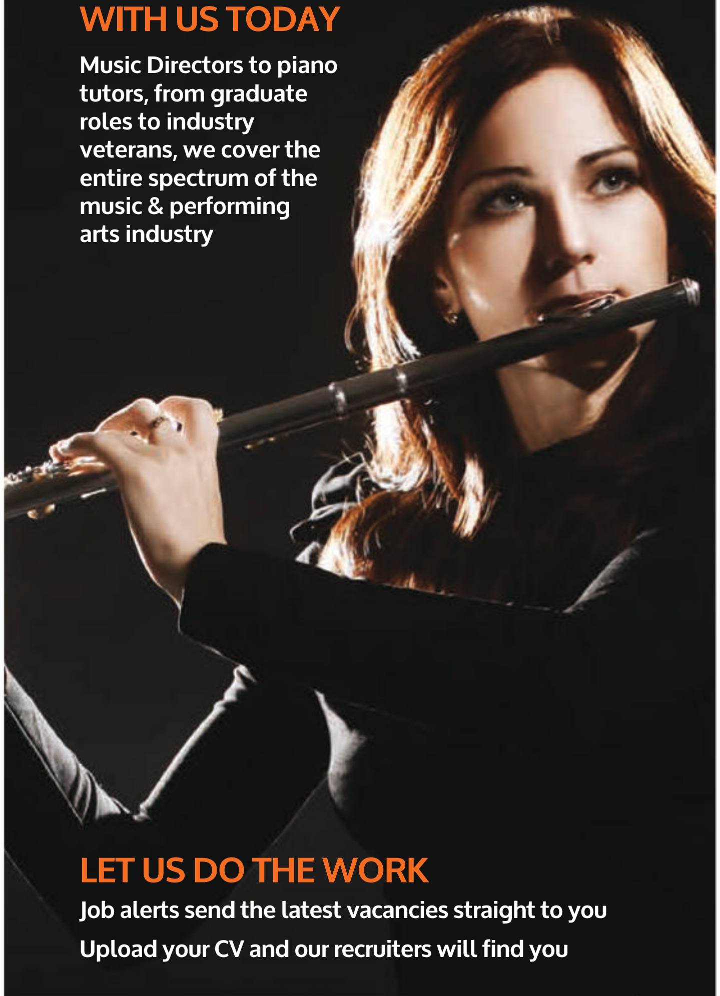

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JULY/AUGUST 2023

LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

ON SALE 28 JUNE

AFTER THE CLIBURN

Yunchan Lim became a sensation when he won the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition last year with a string of stunning performances. Jed Distler talks to him

GEORGE CZIFFRA

Bryce Morrison examines the unique recorded output of this inimitable virtuoso

VILLA-LOBOS'S RUDEPOEMA

Richard Whitehouse traces the history of this powerful work on record and recommends some listening

JOSÉ ITURBI REDISCOVERED

We review a handsome 16-disc set of Iturbi's Rediscovered RCA Victor Recordings

DARIO ACOSTA

Seeking transcendence

Garrick Ohlsson recalls a selection of revelatory musical experiences that left a deep impression on him

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY NICHOLAS

One day in the '70s I was driving and switched on the radio. I missed the beginning of the symphony, the Brahms C minor – I didn't hear the announcement. It was towards the end of the introduction of the first movement. By the middle of the first movement, I had to pull the car off the road to stop and listen, not knowing who this was. By that time, I was fairly sophisticated. I had heard a lot of music and a lot of live concerts with very good people. It turned out to be Furtwängler, one of many accounts of the work he made, but this was a live performance from 1952. It was one of those magical life moments. I could not drive because I knew I would not be safe. It would distract me too much. It's monumental, a commitment to monumentality. If that's not what you want, fine. There's chocolate and vanilla too!

Also in the early '70s I knew very well the people who ran the International Piano Library in New York (which became the International Piano Archive at the University of Maryland): Gregor Benko and Donald Manildi. And as I became friendly with them, I would often spend afternoons there listening to 78s of great pianists that were not available on LP. Endlessly fascinating, educational and great fun. At one point, Gregor put on Callas's 'Qui la voce'. Of course, I knew her recordings, but not this one when she is in her prime with that incredibe intensity and *messa di voce*. And her coloratura! She's beyond a genius. Chopin's music more than most responds to the personality of the performer. Now, should you approach it in a chaste classical way, or like Callas, knowing that *verismo* has happened? Cortot at his best shares the same spiritual emotional world as Callas.

Ernst Lévy was a Swiss Jewish pianist. I got to know him when a composer friend gave me his *Hammerklavier*, one of those inexpensive LPs you could buy at a supermarket on a cheap label. Then I heard his Liszt Sonata. It's outrageous, it's awful, it's transcendent and it's wonderful all at once! I looked him up. He taught physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he taught music, and gave the world premiere of Berlioz's *Te Deum* to which Toscanini came. I was intrigued, found out where he lived in retirement in Morges near Geneva and visited him. Playing the piano was behind him; he had never had the intention of being a pianist. It was just something he did. I found his aesthetic in the early '70s an intriguing mix of that solid Germanic culture instilled with that weird imagination of pianists like Rachmaninov and Horowitz.

Why Björling? Well, this was one of the things that changed my life. I heard him live – once. It was 1960, shortly before he died. Nobody knew he was going to die, of course, but he was in his prime. I had a Swedish father and the Swedes are immensely proud of him. He sang in a benefit concert in Carnegie Hall for the Swedish Seamen's Association. First there was a Swedish choir, then a Norwegian pianist by the name of Grant Johannesen – not bad! – and then the man came on. Same format in the second half except Björling stayed on and gave about six encores. I was vastly inexperienced at 12 and, although I had been to several operas, the moment he opened his mouth, well, I didn't know a voice could do that. So that was the beginning of my addiction to great singing.

I didn't know about Schnabel and I didn't know the Schubert B flat Sonata at all until it was reissued by Angel Records (the American EMI) in their Great Recordings of the Century series. This was in about 1961, so it's another 'imprint' moment. My first piano teacher said I should hear it. At that point I had just got my first turntable. It was in my bedroom where I could listen to things on my own, and the turntable was one of those that, at the end of an LP side, would lift off the needle and turn the power off. I was just beginning to discover these transcendent works like late Beethoven quartets and sonatas which often had big noble movements that left you in a state of suspension. So what I would do is put on, for example, the Schubert as I went to sleep. The slow movement ends the side, and I thought maybe I can achieve transcendence as I sleep. In other words, break the cycle of rebirth and maybe get a glimpse into the next world as I drifted off. I was looking for a lot in music as a young kid! **IP**

Brahms
Symphony No 1
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra / Wilhelm Furtwängler
DG 477 006-2

Bellini
'Qui la voce sua soave' (I Puritani)
Maria Callas; RAI Orchestra Turin / Arturo Basile
Warner Classics 2564 63400-4

Liszt
Piano Sonata
Ernst Lévy
https://youtu.be/7mTbNRyzgmI

Ponchielli
Cielo e mar! (*La Gioconda*)
Jussi Björling; unidentified orchestra / Nils Grevillius
Warner Classics 575900-2

Schubert
Piano Sonata in B flat major, D960
Artur Schnabel
Regis RRC1415

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